

A HANDMAID OF
THE LORD



MARGARET CULKIN
BANNING



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A HANDMAID OF
THE LORD

MARGARET CULKIN BANNING

By *Margaret Culkin Banning*

A HANDMAID OF THE LORD

COUNTRY CLUB PEOPLE

SPELLBINDERS

HALF LOAVES

THIS MARRYING

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A HANDMAID OF THE LORD

BY

MARGARET CULKIN BANNING

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To
A BELOVED CHILD

THE FIRST BOOK

A HANDMAID OF THE LORD

THE FIRST BOOK

CHAPTER I

I

IN the nineties men bore with their shrewish wives rather more than they have come to do, and that was why Veronika Pearse carried as one of her earliest memories the sound of fragile breaking glass, one of her mother's favorite culminations of rage being to hurl lamp chimneys down the stairs. Later it was electric light burners, though these were broken more seldom because of the attendant explosion of sound. She remembered many a night when, with all the globes unscrewed from their sockets, the house would be in utter darkness for hours, darkness broken by the pounding, scolding voice of her mother and by sudden freakish and terrible displays of hysteria. Years after, the sound of heels on wooden stairways always made Veronika a little faint. The staircase in the Pearse house was uncarpeted, and the sudden fast impact of her mother's high heels as she hurried down the stairs was a sound memory as distinct as that of the tinkle of glass fragments. Veronika always hurried for the broom when the lamp chimneys

broke, even when she was only six. She was continually trying to cling to the edge of order, picking up the articles that her mother threw about, putting things back in their places. Her fat, serious, little face was always pale as if from shock, and the brown freckles on her snub nose stood out distinctly.

Mrs. Pearse was one of the hundreds of married viragos who in those times was given her head and considered an act of God and an affliction. Perhaps, hidden somewhere in the privacy of their married life, she did have a grievance against the mild and somewhat paunchy Doctor Pearse. He had given her, during some interludes in their unhappiness, three children, gifts for which she steadily blamed him. There may have been something, some suspected or even actual unfaithfulness during the time she was carrying her children, a happening not at all unlikely, considering that Doctor Pearse had presumably been younger and more vigorous than his children remembered him and must have been cruelly affronted by the grudging disgust with which in even her milder moments his wife regarded the basis of marriage. There undoubtedly had been warnings against men given to her before marriage through unclean mouths and ugly stories told her about the opportunities offered to doctors for illicit relations. Mixed with all the corruption of her thoughts were the fixed ideas of a mind which had ceased to develop, that women were badly treated, that men were lazy and that between them was natural warfare. Undoubtedly too there was physical debility influencing her shrewishness, illness never diagnosed, for she had a vast distrust of doctors as well as a terrible prudery. In her furies these things came out. Quarrels always started from a stated assumption that her husband was

not treating her well, that she wouldn't be his slave any longer. As she scolded she ignited further thoughts and misconceptions until her rage was beyond her own control. The torrent of her mother's words hit against Veronika's consciousness like rain against a pane of glass. But with the sights, the sounds of fury, the occasional dangers of it when rage forgot all reason, she was marked. Her passion for order and decorum had its origin in those childish days of disorder and wretchedness. Her apprehension of disagreement between people must have come from that time too, along with ridiculous things such as being inordinately greedy.

The Pearse children were always hungry or stuffed because there was no such thing as an order of meals in their experience. It was usually impossible for Mrs. Pearse to remain quiescent during a meal even if she had prepared it. The sight of her husband, his most casual remark, could set on fire the resentment that always lay smoldering in her. When being a woman ceased to be a shame to her it became a grievance. A kind of perverted feminism steamed in her all the time. Men had "the best time." They got out of the house when the work was to be done, went to offices, put their feet on the desks and flirted with nurses and stenographers while women stayed at home and slaved for men. She never forgave men for her labor pains. She never forgave her husband for being able to sleep while the children were sick, for instinctively she could not sleep though she might feel her children were nuisances. She denounced the entire male sex and possibly was secretly avid for the kind of experience she had been denied. Perhaps she felt, without articulation, that she had never found anything in the relation of man and woman except

pain and responsibility, and she was jealous of the fact that other people might have happier experience.

Slightly educated, educated out of the simplicity of the class of women who took life as it was, and not advanced far enough to think through to reasonable or fair solutions she was to her children a specter of unreason. They never were deceived in their clear little minds as to the cause of unrest in their home. Boundless was their sympathy for their father.

He probably had slightly the best of the situation. There was every excuse for his dropping into a warm restaurant and having supper—he could always say a patient had detained him and as he would not be believed anyhow, it hardly mattered. And when he stayed away the children were not sorry. They coveted hours of peace and meals they prepared and ate together. At the grocery they would buy chocolate marshmallow cookies and big cans of prepared baked beans. Then with an air of cookery Veronika would drop the can solemnly into steaming hot water while Lily peeled the potatoes. Veronika's greatest childhood pleasure was to mix up beans and potatoes and butter and eat the mess luxuriously while she read a book.

They would feast. Those were banquets, those gourmandish meals in the warm kitchen, with peace in the house. Veronika never quite separated physical comfort from mental peace.

But if they had strain and discomfort, at least the Pearse children escaped the twitterings which surround so many children. They got at life young and a sense of fact, grim as fascinating, humorous as terrible, came to them early. They never had any illusions about life's being equable. To them existence was an escape from

quarrels, a continual attempt to rectify disharmony. They formulated strategies to meet things as they came, had philosophies which were an odd blend of superstition and observation, melancholy and childish hope. One knew, for example, that it was a long road that had no turning, that it was always darkest just before dawn. Add to that the digestion of a few romances, in which magical and thrilling improvement in circumstances comes just before conclusion and the shrewd knowledge that after a particular battle peace reigned for a time in their household, and there was an excellent working philosophy. Also there was the knowledge that the Brontë sisters had died young and suffered unjustly. The girls loved the Brontës and felt kinship to them on a basis of natural melancholy.

There was of course the comic phase. Somebody upsetting something unexpectedly on some one else or more rarely their mother in a humorous mood when some weight of oppression seemed to lift from her mind and she was like a mischievous girl with a taste for practical jokes. Holidays worked partial magic too. There was something in Mrs. Pearse's German heredity which revered a holiday. She respected no church and no holyday but she had a respect for Thanksgiving and Christmas. There were presents and stockings and nervous festivity, but the thing the children liked best was the night before Thanksgiving or Christmas with the smell of wet turkey and onion and bread dressing pervading the kitchen. Anticipation was the most joyful emotion they ever had, for on the holiday things invariably went more or less askew.

They were heathen. The theory of prayer they found once in a while about them in the minds of other children, in the precepts of the Sunday School teacher when

they were packed off to the nearest church occasionally. They realized that their attendance at Sunday School was dependent primarily on having new clothes or clothes in order, and while money was not scarce in the household it was so wretchedly administered that the children rarely had a whole church costume ready. But once in a while they went, and got an impression of religion from the drone of the minister or Sunday School superintendent, from the alternate fulsomeness or humility of the hymns which they early learned to parody. It was their mother who sent them to Sunday School in sudden flares of respectability, but it was their father who once in a while asserted himself and took them to the white board church five blocks away, to a ritual called Mass. They did not feel proud of attendance there. The people who knelt around them were mostly foreigners, or Irish women sighing over rosaries. The ritual was unexplained, and in their hearts the girls were ashamed of being branded as Roman Catholics. Once when a priest came to call and their mother was insulting to him they stood behind the pantry door in scared giggles—and they created their own God. God took place in their scheme of things as a person who had rather fooled the Brontë girls (who were always taken in by him) and as one from whom favors might be wrung by certain propitiations. They both prayed with an eye on results, and when they prayed for a peaceful night and their mother raged they naturally suspected Deity.

There were old medical books all over the house, and sprinkled among these a large supply of minor classics, standard sets of the world's best oratory and the world's best essays and the world's best humor, mixed with a few Greek and French translations. Erudition had

slipped by their father, but he loved the signs of it and he loved to read. They all read, even Tom, as naturally as they breathed.

Many things that they met in books were incomprehensible to them, but they were usually content to let the loose ends of thought fly. Their mother had given them extremely healthy bodies and surrounded them with so much excitement that they never sought juvenile salaciousness. Veronika's first excited sense of sex came not in the whispers of school children, which she never was invited to share, but in the thrilling experiences of some of the ladies in a book of English and Scottish ballads. She was fully informed by these, which were unexpurgated, that there was always great concern about the bed the lady slept in and with whom. But imaginings carried her no farther.

Far more important was the catching of the infrequent street car to get them to High School on time. The school was so far from their home that the car was a necessity. But a race it was—against fate and against time! A tragic adventure every morning of their lives was the attempt of the girls to catch the car. With Tom it was different. His clothes were bought by his father and he had things ready most of the time. He drove through the disorder of the house regardless of anything except that he was going to meet some of his friends on a certain car. But Lily and Veronika were blocked by dozens of things—by the fact that their mother had promised to iron a petticoat early and hadn't done it, by a shoe lace breaking (there were never extra shoe laces in that house), by their father coming downstairs and asking for his breakfast, which one of them must try to prepare with an eye on the clock—by the

difficulty of getting breakfast themselves for themselves. Their father had forbidden them to go to school without it, but he had no idea of how often they did so. Their mother was always flurried by the exigency of keeping any appointments on time, and a flurry with her changed almost always into a temper. And also they hampered themselves. They were, both of them, unskillful with their hands. Often and often Veronika choked down a piece of toast, saying over and over in her mind, "God, let me catch the car—God, let me catch the car."

Sometimes she and Lily were successful and with the other children sought places in the warm front of the jerking, one-horse street car, pushing forward as far as they could, Lily's face blond and sweet and plaintive under her brown felt hat and Veronika always looking a little absurd, the freckles cruelly evident in the strong morning light with no rise of color in her face to soften its blotchiness, the puff of her cheeks turning her pathos into comedy and her sleek, long thin hair edging her face without framing it. She was conscious of her unattractiveness, but the contrast of herself with those about her never bothered her. Even early she was filled with such tremendous ambition, such dreams, that her mind leapt carelessly over the minor differences between herself and her companions. That was where she branched from Lily, for Lily wanted to have the same things that the people around her had. Lily was eager for a red wool coat or a new serge dress, while Veronika paraded her soul and her body in imaginings that became possibilities only to her.

To battle and to dream were her accomplishments.

It was cold country. For nine months of the year the body needed extra protection. For nine months of the year one might expect the winds bringing snow or rain or merely the chilling song of their own restlessness. Around the little city lay the gaping wounds that were open pit mines, their orifices still trodden red clay. A truck farm struggled here and there—a dairy, but for the most part it was waste land with the gray rocks showing through the thin sod at intervals, a land where pines and spruces were natural habitants. Vegetation needed strength to survive. Barren, often bleak country, without the grandeur of mountains or the peace of plains, but courageous, unbroken as if it turned a surly refusal to the plow and the harrow. It exacted strength and scorned frailty. The children who played in its snowdrifts were hard, red-cheeked youngsters. In such a place if the imagination does not starve it turns to fantasy and wild adventures and hard-earned shelter from the storm. Winds singing around the corner of the dark house, sighing pines, give no grace to fancy, and when the storm is within as well as without, when the darkness is charged with anger and hate and fear, the easy temper does not survive. Malison belongs to the storm.

Mrs. Pearse hated Valhalla. She had hoped that her husband would settle in the milder farming country of Ohio, where she had been brought up. But to Valhalla he had come and there been rooted by the hundreds of threads which hold a doctor to the lives of his patients. It had been a village when he had come. It became a city in name, with street car lines stretching through it, and a stray factory or two rearing ugly wooden bulks.

Mostly it was still tributary to the mine and dominated by the mine. The mine called for and received hundreds of men, recruited from other places, other countries, who brought little allegiance to it—only their strength. The traditions they held, the memories locked in their minds never were given to Valhalla. They lived in parts of the city which became peculiarly their own, and some of them had families and some of them, living there only for a season or so, had no home but the bed in the boarding house, the saloon and later the cheap movie house. Now and then in a fierce flare, some passion came to light—some one murdered his wife and there was a rough newspaper story of an amour, succulent enough if it had been a tale of Americans, but draped in the foreign nomenclature, located in the shack of some miner, it became, except to some imaginative reporter, only another instance of the way “the miners live.”

The miners did not belong to the city life. They had never even heard of the Pearse domestic scandal. But they made their impression on Veronika. She never thought of them, in childhood at least, in any humanitarian way. She never thought of them as romantic. But they were there, part of the roughness of life, part of the scene of red clay and spruce tree, uncouth looking men whose eyes met hers occasionally as she stared at them, passing some of them on street or road, and whose eyes told her nothing except vaguely that life wasn't all beer and skittles—which indeed she already knew.

CHAPTER II

IN the kitchen Veronika struggled to fix the sink. It refused to drain, and she sat beneath it with a monkey wrench unscrewing bolts. She wanted the kitchen to be clean before any one got home, and the sink had gone back on her at the last minute. Above her head the paint peeled off the wall, leaving white patches with smoky brown flakes of paint clinging. The kitchen was shabby and in ill repair. But Veronika, conscious of achievement, saw none of that. She was glad for the order around her, because of the white floor that she had scrubbed and the new oilcloth on the table that was immaculate and the pan of potatoes that were peeled and lay in clear water preserving their whiteness. She toiled at the sink and wondered when her mother would come downstairs, and if Lily was having a good time at Daisy's party, and if Tom would have his picture in the paper to-morrow if the S.H.S. won the basketball game to-day. She had a way of rounding up her family in her mind. She always worried about them and took idle and useless responsibility for them, hardly justified by the two years difference in age between her and Tom and the scant year and a half between her and her sister, who was younger.

Mrs. Pearse had gone to her room and locked the door. She did that sometimes for half a day at a time. When she came out she would have written a couple of letters in her extravagant curlicued handwriting with intolerable pale ink, letters to her sister Minnie and her sister Rose. Letters were very important to her. Or she would have

elaborately frizzed her hair, or perhaps done nothing at all except sit and rock and read the daily newspaper. She never read anything else.

Veronika could hear her stirring now and made haste with her operation. When her mother came into the kitchen it was the signal for interference with every activity. She loosened the joint and scooped out the rubbish accumulated in it. Then with lye and boiling water she cleaned it. It was not a pleasant task, but like every fundamental necessity it gave her pleasure. The water ran through beautifully at last and she watched it with satisfaction.

Outside the afternoon was closing in. Snow had begun to fall again, filling in the deep trenches dug along the sidewalk to the street. It was a rough, driven snow coming slantingly along. Veronika thought of Lily's new seven dollar velvet hat. It would be spotted and Lily would be wretched. She glanced at the alarm clock on the side of the cutting board. Past four. If it kept up like this it would be drifted in entirely before night. Drifts meant isolation for another twenty-four hours. And yet the snugness of the half dark kitchen captured her. Outside the snow beating on the three great pines which stood at the back of the house, and within the glow of the fire coming through the open slats in the door of the coal range. Her mind drew off a little to look at the pictures. That strange double power of acting in the drama of life, even as she observed it, had already become Veronika's. She stood at the window, her blue and white checked apron tied around her waist, its ample folds revealing the slimness of the sixteen-year-old girl figure who watched the snow drive past, dimming the barren landscape.

Her mother's heels clicked on the stairs and the door to the kitchen opened. Veronika did not turn. She knew all the familiar beginnings of her mother's sentences. Still less did she wish to see the tight-drawn face, the bright half-hysteric eyes which she imagined behind her. But Mrs. Pearse opened no attack. She went to the cupboard and took out the canister of tea, making herself busy with the kettle and the stove lids, rattling everything. There was a fierce busyness about her mother's activities that Veronika detested. Everything she touched seemed to make an unnecessary clatter.

"More snow," said Mrs. Pearse, "we might as well be dead and in our graves as in this place. I'm not going to stand it. I'm going to put on my hat and out I go."

"Why don't you?" asked Veronika ironically.

"Make fun of me—go as far as you like. Only understand I brought you into the world. Your father didn't. While he was running the streets with other women—"

"Oh, shut up—" said Veronika. "I've been working here all afternoon. You can't come down here and fight."

"Where's your father? Was that him at the phone?"

Veronika did not answer.

"Was that your father at the phone, I said?"

"No."

"Well—you better call him up and tell him his mother's dead."

Veronika wheeled.

"What are you talking about?"

"His mother's dead."

"Where did you hear that?"

"I heard it. He got a telegram this morning. I took it."

"And this is the first time you've tried to reach him."

"Yes, it is. He'd have been running off East to have a good time. I know him. Running off to have meals on dining cars and deserting his family without a cent."

Veronika's mind went into quick action. She had little notion of propriety except that her father should be told.

She understood in a flash why her mother had been secluded all day in her room. She was keeping the knowledge of the death secret until the Eastern train was gone. It left at four o'clock. She had no idea whether her father would go East or not. The thought worried her. She too felt it a waste of money with ten tons of coal delivered this morning and their cost bandied about. However, instinct told her that her father should know.

He was not at his office when she tried to reach him. Her mother listening to Veronika's efforts called shrilly:

"Off with some hussy—that's where he is."

"You fiend—you," said Veronika mechanically, and kept on with her efforts. He called her finally from the Blakes, where there was to be a baby in whose birth he was assisting. Veronika gave him the news with an attempt at softening. Her grandmother meant nothing to her, and she felt her father's agitation a little silly.

"Get Doctor Morse and send him over here quick, Ronny," he said, "and I'm coming home."

That disturbed Veronika's plans of course. She had expected that he would not be home for supper. However, she found Doctor Morse and got him headed for the Blakes' house, where he was to help "bring" Mrs. Blake's baby, about which, in spite of her father's profession, Veronika had limited information and mental pictures very much out of drawing.

"What's he coming home for?" asked her mother. "Lazy loafer. Just an excuse. Everybody knew the old woman was about to die anyhow."

But the thing that surprised her daughter was that in Mrs. Pearse's tone was a note of concern about something—death perhaps. She was slightly and surprisingly hushed for some reason.

Lily came in, vastly worried about the hat. She took it off and mopped it tenderly, wondering if the spots of snow would come out, bemoaning them.

"Isn't it a shame whenever I get anything decent that something like that has to happen? Why do we never have any luck?"

"Did you have a good time?" asked Veronika.

"Oh, good enough—the girls were sort of mean—I've got to have a party, Ronny."

"How can you have a party when your father doesn't give me enough to buy clothes?"

They knew that was nonsense, but it was rubbed into them so much that it stuck in part. Neither girl paid any attention to the remark, but it recalled to Veronika the thing she had forgotten in the excitement about Lily's hat.

"Grandmother Pearse's dead—father got a telegram."

"Is she?"

"Um—father's coming home. He seemed awfully sorry. I hope," added Veronika severely to her mother, "that for once you'll have the decency to leave him alone when his mother lies dead in her grave. Let him have his sorrow in peace."

"Much he'll sorrow—" answered her mother.

It was half past five. Supper had to be made. Veronika and Lily went to the kitchen bickering about who

should do this or that. Lily hated to get her hands in onions. She had little fastidiousnesses that Veronika lacked. So that it was Veronika who made the pudgy meat balls out of Hamburger steak and Lily who peeled the potatoes, a huge apron tied over her official best dress of brown rajah silk, her eyes still melancholy from disappointments at the party. Secretly Veronika ached for her. She was always aching for some one. She hated to have any one hurt, especially unexpectedly hurt, because she knew too accurately how it felt. But there was no sentimentality in her manner. Expressed affection was absurd and caresses beyond measure silly.

She tried a more subtle form of consolation.

"I suppose Ellie Lewis was falling all over the boys as usual, with the pink silk ruffles sticking out all over her."

That was it. Ellie Lewis was Lily's object of envy. So, if you made her absurd, it restored Lily's self-respect. She giggled.

"She does make an awful fool of herself. But she has everything. There she was, called for by that crazy-looking chauffeur of theirs, offering to take all the boys home with her. Lights in the car inside—it looked like an advertisement."

"Silly show-off stuff," said Veronika, patting the meat ball fiercely in her instant comprehension of the fact that Lily had probably had to trudge off home alone with the snow falling on her beloved velvet hat, while Ellie waved her embryonic lovers into the limousine.

Lily was depressed beyond cheering. She sighed that she might as well take off her dress now and went upstairs, and Veronika opened an enthralling library book

called "The Pasteboard Crown," which had been luring her, laid it open on the pantry shelf, and proceeded to set the table and read alternately, completely forgetful of Lily and her father.

He came in a little later. Ronny heard the car run into the garage, the bang of the door and her father's steps down the driveway toward the house. It was a little driveway and a little car. The garage had been a barn when Dr. Pearse had paid his calls with a horse and buggy, but, like everything else the Pearses owned, it stamped them as belonging to a class with pretensions.

The outer kitchen door flew open with a flurry of wind, and the Doctor stamped in snow laden even in the passage from the garage to the house.

Her first aghast and embarrassed amazement came from the fact that he looked as though he had been crying. She did not know what to say.

"Snowing hard, isn't it?" she said.

"Good girl to get Doctor Morse so quickly," answered her father, unheeding. "Where's your mother?"

Veronika shrugged.

"She's been hiding all day."

"Kept me from getting off to-night, didn't she? Well, I wired—it's all right. I'll get off to-morrow and that will be in time."

"You're going East?" gasped Veronika.

Her father looked at her curiously as if apprehending suddenly how little grounding she had had in human emotion.

"Poor little savage," he said. "Yes, Ronny, I'm going, and I'm thinking seriously of taking you and Lily along."

Mrs. Pearse, who had been, as often, listening, confronted them.

"So that's it?" she cried. "That's the idea. The old woman's not dead at all. Just planning to take my children away from me. I'd like to see you take them, that's all, mister. I'd just like to see you."

"Well, you will," he answered. "Veronika, I want you and Lily to get your clothes together and get ready to start with me to-morrow."

A violent paroxysm came over the woman's face.

"What do you mean?" she cried. "Do you think I'm going to get their clothes ready?"

"But we haven't any clothes ready," Veronika objected, "we couldn't, father."

"You will," said the doctor, in a tone out of which everything seemed to have drained with which Veronika was familiar, "you will if you go naked."

The night was a night of madness. Supper, attempted, was abandoned by almost every one. On the table the balls of Hamburger steak, fried into fat-laden hardness, were hacked at by first one and then another. Dr. Pearse went upstairs and his wife followed him. He had a habit of retreating into silence. Perhaps in those silences he actually did not hear her.

The girls set the table, rather carefully as was their way, and put the food upon it. Tom had come in, silent after a disappointing basketball game, and they all sat down except Mrs. Pearse, who refused to sit with them, as she often did, and paced to and fro in the dining-room as they ate. The shadow of events was on them all. The girls were half-scared by their father's pronouncements, Tom had his mind partly on the game and partly

on the fact that his mother was in a temper, and their father, with those embarrassing reddened eyes, hardly pretended to eat before he put his head down on his hands and groaned at his wife to stop. But she had no intention of stopping, not perhaps any capability of doing so. She raged on, insulting his family, his mother, his sister.

"But what would happen to school if we went East now?" asked Veronika.

"Is there any use making her worse? Drop it," said Tom, nodding at his mother. His handsome blond face, the face that carried him anywhere, was surly.

Their father answered. "No—let her get as bad as she wants. This is my turn to have my way and I'm going to have it, Annie, if it's the last thing I do on earth. Those children are coming with me."

Mrs. Pearce seized an end of the tablecloth and jerked it roughly so that half the dishes tipped. Tom, raging now, flung a glass of water full in her face and she screamed. As they stood over the strewn food, all gazing at the woman with the water dripping from her face, hysteria gleamed in every eye. Then Tom pushed out of the room and they heard the front door slam. He often did that, coming back late at night to lock himself in his room on the door of which he had ingeniously arranged a bolt that Mrs. Pearce could not disturb.

The doctor left the room and the girls stood looking at each other.

"Do you suppose he means it, Lily?" asked Veronika.

"Certainly he does—and I'm going to go," said Lily. "But we'd better go up and get our clothes hid before she gets at them."

But they were too late. It was a common way Mrs. Pearse had to hide some article of clothing if she objected to some one's going out. Only never with Tom. She feared Tom's rages, so like her own. And at seventeen he was very strong and had none of his father's dislike of physical violence. With the girls, whom she could still dominate, it was a common trick.

They found where she had hidden Ronny's best coat and dress and Lily's things. They were in a bag in the attic and there was a tearing struggle when the things were found. Mazda burners were unscrewed from all the electric lights all over the house. Late that night Lily found that her best hat had been put in the sink and the water turned on it. Her scream and long hysterics were like an echo to the greater hysterics. The telephone rang. Dr. Pearse would come at once. Some woman was dying. Out he went, buttoned into his greatcoat, his face gray with fatigue, and the house fell silent. Dr. Pearse never gave his daughters any sedative, but that night he had broken his rule for Lily. She lay in bed strangely calm.

When Tom came in, about midnight, he found Ronny with a candle stuck in the candlestick in the dining-room and the shades pulled down, cleaning up. In the uncertain light her face looked very mature.

"Let it go," said Tom.

"I can't. Besides that glass of water you threw will ruin the carpet if it's not mopped up. You go on out and get a glass of milk, Tom. Think there's enough. There's some doughnuts too that she bought somewhere."

Tom went and brought the milk and doughnuts in to where Ronny cleaned laboriously.

"So father's going to take you East. The sooner we

all get out of here the better. I'll be in college in two years and then I'm never coming back."

"I think it's crazy," said Ronny. "Why, there'd never be anything done here if Lily and I went off."

"Oh, she'd look out for me all right," said Tom.

"You haven't any business being out so late, Tom," his sister said irrelevantly.

"This is a hell of a place to come back to."

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "Is it any worse for you than the rest of us? Is there anything we can do?"

"You can do what father says and beat it off East and not come back for a while. I wish he'd take me."

"How could we go?" worried Veronika. "How could we possibly?" The responsibility sat heavily upon her. She was skilled in struggle, and she guessed that her mother's fury would spend itself in the night. By tomorrow if they could get their things together at all—The clock struck one. They heard their mother's footsteps in the upper hall, ready to renew attack if their father had come in. But Veronika knew that Mrs. Pearse had had time to realize what she had done to the seven-dollar hat and that the next attack might be plaintive instead of wild.

"Go on up, Tom, and see if you can bully her into being decent for the rest of the night."

"Useless after the glass of water," said Tom, and disappeared up the back stairs. She heard his door shut and the bolt drawn across it. Standing the broom on its stick in one corner of the kitchen, Veronika repeated her question to herself. "How could we go?"

The candlelight wavering across Ronny's face left her chubby cheeks in shadow and brought out the wisdom of her eyes, the unsoftened wisdom of eyes which might

have been those of a person of thirty instead of a girl of sixteen. Falling across her face from the unshaded eyes to the mouth, which hung wearily, there lay, like a welt, the mark of melancholy.

CHAPTER III

I

OLD Mr. Pearse sat upright in his chair, a copy of the "Life of St. Francis of Assisi" in his hand. He was more than ever removed from triviality on this day of the burial of his wife. She who had been an old and ailing woman was now a suffering soul in purgatory, and he prayed inwardly and constantly for her release. No soft reminiscences of his life with the woman who had borne him eight children interfered with his sanctified thought of her. No gentle memory of Nora as a yielding bride, a boisterous young matron, diverted his eyes from the holy wraith that she now was in the shades of purgatory. Before him lay a black-bordered Mass card.

Sitting opposite him in the back parlor, Veronika wondered at her heredity. She had been told four times in the last day that she "looked like her grandmother," the white, uninhabited, waxy creature who had been laid away with elaborate ritual. She was faint still from the journey to Westover which had been consummated over the fierce resistance of her mother and she was strange to this insistence on a purgatory with its living spirits begging prayers. A ghostly fear was over her as she watched the noble head of the old man so sternly concentrated on immortality. Lily had gone with her aunt somewhere. She had wept at the funeral and they had all been sorry for the tender emotions of the girl.

Ronny, alert at this first encounter with death, had not cried. She was stirred to her depths and desperately concerned over the fugitive spirit.

It was cold—a still, sparkling cold, outside. Inside the gas lamp was lighted on the table beside her grandfather, and warm gusts of heat rose from the hot-air register. Ronny watched Mr. Pearse. She was already glib in the thin skeptic phrase that “one religion is as good as another.” But the concentrated Catholicism around her impressed her. If it were true—and it was hard to doubt to-day in the face of this deep belief around her—that souls needed help, she hated to think of that soul twirling in purgatory. Secretly she conjured God, even while she superstitiously wondered if her prayers were any good, to excuse this one soul, this soul to which she felt a fearful kinship because its owner had looked like her.

She was saddened to-night, basically because she was tired, and strange, partly because of her mother, who had cried hysterically when they had gone, until Veronika, always far too ready with her pity, would have stayed at home if she could.

Her grandfather's eyes were upon her. Under the reef of his eyebrows they shone, remarkably blue, blue like a child's eyes.

“I hear them say you're a clever girl,” he said.

So she was used to being rated in the High School. She smiled in faint embarrassment.

“But cleverness,” he went on, “is of no avail without the grace of God. Have you the grace of God?”

“I hope so.”

“'Tis strange then that you make the sign of the cross with your left hand.”

She was staggered. The observation of such niceties had not occurred to her.

"I hardly knew what I did in church."

He knew what he wished to know.

"'Tis no matter," he said gruffly. "No matter." In spite of her sixteen years Veronika had a way of looking desolatingly undefended, like a small ungunned fortress.

2

There were seven relatives for supper, besides Aunt Kate, who was her father's sister and ran the house, and old Aunt Anne, no longer certain of her step nor of the one of her family for whom she sorrowed. Death had come often before in that old house as Aunt Anne knew. The children of her brother had come and some had lived and some had died. In her pocket hung a rosary, and her unsure fingers rested most easily upon that. The rest were aunts and uncles and several cousins. It seemed a banquet to the girls. Supper for twelve in Valhalla would have been impossible, but here it appeared to be simple. The dining-room was paneled to its height in old cherry, the varnish seamed here and there, but it caught the light of the gas and the dimmest reflection flickered there. Veronika loved that. She felt distinguished. Lily's spirits were returning rapidly. She had done her hair in a new way which she had seen adorning one of the High School girls at home and was conscious of looking her prettiest.

It was the accepted formula that each guest had come to cheer the old man, though the patriarch sat silently through his meal, eating little and leaving the table be-

fore the others. They heard him mount the stairs slowly and heavily and a kind of relaxation spread immediately. There was a general diffusion of comfort. It was clear to Ronny from what she heard and saw and from the temper of their grief that it was an ordered unpassionate sorrow for one whose death left a void in habit rather than an agony in the soul. Her grandmother had been ill for a long time. Mourning for her was embodied in reminiscences of her life, in the knowledge sharply borne in by a funeral that some one of the group must be next to go. If these relatives had not been sad it was apparent that they would have been gay together. They were clever. They held up each other's idiosyncrasies for mockery. A ripple of merriment spread at the story of the remote and eager cousin, who had put in her usual struggle at a family funeral for a front place in the procession that followed the hearse.

Again was Veronika's likeness to her grandmother discussed.

"She has the Pearse forehead though."

"Does she look at all like her mother, Francis?"

"No," said Doctor Pearse, "it is Lily who is a Miller."

Lily wriggled and blushed under contemplation. Veronika did not like it. She disliked the occupation of her by either Pearses or Lindons. Veronika had always cherished the hope that she had been a foundling. Circumstantial evidence was hemming her in.

"What are you to do with them, Francis? Follow the Pearse tradition? Marry off one of them and make a nun of the other?"

Veronika's chin straightened. She glanced at the aunt who made the careless, half-unkind inquiry. She knew

what she meant by it. Lily was the pretty one. She answered for her father.

“There’s too much to do in *this* world to shut yourself up in a convent.”

Every one laughed. Veronika’s remark came flatly with the full air of quotation.

“So you wouldn’t like to be a nun.”

“I’d die,” answered Veronika succinctly.

She caught her father’s glance of admonition and bent her head over her plate again. She was conscious that she had merely been absurd and a swelling grew in her throat.

Later, as they went upstairs to their room, her father spoke to her.

“You are a guest here, Ronny. You must try to please your relations and not be a silly snobbish girl. What is there to be snobbish about?”

That was where they always stopped Veronika. She didn’t know what there was to be snobbish about. The question came in school from irritated girls, from her mother, from Lily, all of them sensing the eager spirit in her. She couldn’t answer. She did not know. She had to let it pass always, for she knew how she would have been mocked if she had taken that cherished word “aristocratic” out of her mind, if she had tried to explain the guidance which she followed.

She said good night and went into the room she was to share with Lily. Her sister was already in bed, her curly hair loose on the pillow, more like a picture-book child than ever.

“It’s warm, Ronny,” she said. “Hurry up and jump in. I’ve a hot water bottle here.”

Veronika undressed. She was too tired even for talk. All she wanted was the comfort of the bed and the sense of her sister's relaxed body beside her.

"Father doesn't intend to have us go back to Valhalla this year if they'll keep us here," said Lily.

"Who told you so?"

"I heard them talking of school—he and Aunt Kate."

"But who's going to look after the house at home?"

"I suppose *she* is," said Lily, dealing with her mother in italics.

"One would think you'd never lived there," answered Veronika crossly. "It will go to rack and ruin."

"Well, you can't do anything about it, can you? If father wants us to stay here we'll have to stay."

Veronika swallowed. She had known of course that this was in the air, that her father had not brought them all this way for a few weeks' visit. But at the definable sense of separation she ached. The old responsibilities tugged at her. They were burdens, but they belonged to her. She had been brought up to struggle and they did her no kindness in releasing her so sharply.

"And I think they want to make Catholics out of us."

"This isn't the Middle Ages. They can't make us. Do you like it here, Lil?"

"I should say I do. They're all so nice to us. I'm glad that—that thing is out of the house though. I couldn't sleep in the house with a dead person. I'm glad her room was at the other end of the hall. Come closer, Ronny."

Veronika's arm slipped under her sister's neck and Aunt Kate, coming in to see if they were comfortable, found them so and tiptoed out again. But Veronika was not asleep. She lay with her eyes shut and thought

of Valhalla. The furnace would go out. Her mother would forget it and you couldn't count on Tom to stoke it regularly. She wondered if any one had laid a thin layer of coal on for the night. Her mother always put the coal on in a heap and it burned out before the next morning.

Lily was asleep, but in the room across the hall some one was muttering. Ronny listened for a long while. She knew that her grandfather slept there and wondered if there was anything that she could do, if he were ill. Perhaps she should get up and see if he wanted anything.

The muttering went on. Mindful of her ignorance of the customs of the house she opened her door cautiously and crept down the hall. Her grandfather's door stood open a crack and through it she could see in the room, half lit with moonlight, the old man kneeling by his bed, a gaunt, night-shirted figure with a suit coat over his shoulders and a rosary in his hand. He was praying for his wife's soul.

Across the gap of their ages and their knowledge, Veronika's mind leapt to meet the mysticism and the wonder of the belief of the old man. She knew that he was suffering. Back in her room she fell by the bed. It seemed to her that she could almost hear the plaintive spirit wailing in a shadowy, wind-driven place that was purgatory. The winds were cold and gray like curling smoke and the ghosts were at their mercy. Meager spirits that had been starved for prayers were there, unlucky ones that needed only one more petition to let them out and that last one failed them. She saw them toss and tumble, heard their thin shrieks and among them was the new ghost, the wraith that was her

grandmother, unaccustomed, frightened, quivering. Her grandmother was no longer the old waxen body. She was like Veronika, tremulous, hating hurt.

With her face deep in her quilt she prayed desperately, soundlessly, in the intimate bargaining with God that was her custom.

"Let her out, God. Let her out. I'll be a Catholic if you do."

CHAPTER IV

MICHAEL discovered Veronika. Lily had captivated every one else from the moment of her appearance, but Veronika remained aloof. She was proud of Lily's triumphs and it never occurred to her to try to imitate them. But Michael, looking Lily over when he had come in one day after the funeral, had turned to Veronika and tried out on her a few Rabelaisian statements to which she responded with interest and a quick fastening of her mood on his.

Michael was the brightest star in the whole family constellation. In the society of Westover, organized for a hundred years, the wall between Catholic and Protestant society was built high and thick. It took Michael to jump over it, lightly, casually, as if the wall was not really there. He jumped because he liked to jump and not because he coveted what lay on the more aristocratic side of the wall. He liked as well to sit with his old uncle, Veronika's grandfather, and get him to tell Irish stories which he would tell no one else, the tales of the poor silly fellow who coveted the scrapin's of the pot, of "Michael Brayton atein' bacon," and such lore. Michael had an eye for the picturesque and a flair for people, and back of the freckles and pallor of Veronika he sensed the same eagerness for living that beset him.

He was twenty-nine and pretended that he did as he pleased, earned an easy living at the law and vibrated for his amusements between the old stone houses which were the strongholds of Westover society, the life at the army post which skirted Westover and the back room

of Giuseppe Allemino's, the Italian padrone, where garlic hung from the ceiling and the Italian talked politics while the eternally pregnant Mrs. Allemino regaled them with wine.

All these things he might not have been able to do if he had not been as handsome as it is easily possible for a man to be and quite without small ambitions. Westover was small and he stretched it to its limits to make it amusing, for it held him after all. His mother was old and infirm and his younger brother struggled with a disease that neither drugs nor diversion seemed to palliate.

It was soon the family theory that Veronika was too old for her age and should be made young. She hated the attempt, recognizing it under every form in which it was made. But Michael did not try to make her young. He took her about with him and sharpened her taste for life which already was none too dull.

But he was only the trimming of her life in Westover. There was the convent. Black gloves in politeness class, feet crossed at the proper angle, deft courtesies and Veronika secretly smiling at it all even while the delightful fastidiousness of it captivated her. Perhaps in such exactitudes lay the best of things.

Scenes stood out as if she watched a play, so unabsorbed was she.

The class in Christian Doctrine. Mother Grace with her face that was thin and pointed like a candle flame that has burned steadily for a long time. Doctrine starting from an assumption, somewhere hidden under quantities of statement that Veronika turned over and over to get at the assumption. One could never find it in time. Frances Braden being shocking.

"Reverend Mother, may I ask a question?"

"Frances?"

"When at the end of the mass the priest says, 'Ite, Missa est'—that the mass is ended, why does the choir sing 'Thanks be to God'?"

The flame leaping in Mother Grace's cheeks. Frances, impish under her black veil, kneeling before the altar in penance. It wasn't very funny, thought Veronika, but it was daring.

In the French class was the worst embarrassment. The class turned its back on the teacher and prayed rapidly before the lesson.

"Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de grace"—easy diction, the smoothness of conversation. Veronika could not pray like that. Her public school French was limited to translation. With the dictionary beside her she could read her Daudet, but slipping through these almost metrical prayers, following the unslowing conversation of the class with its instructor was impossible. She was afraid to speak. She could not slur the edges of her words together as the others did, and when she tried she slurred words which should have been left sharp and separate.

She studied Psychology. That was better. The science of the soul or spirit. Psyche was the spirit, the spirit given by the living God, the sentient soul. She felt her soul now, like a formless, chiffon-like substance waving within her. When she was a child she had always thought of it as a lump. This was something she wanted to find out about, something whose intimation made her feel learned and clever. Psychology, the study of the living soul.

History was a story of the church, marching through the centuries, a militant church, making Henry kneel in

the snow at Canossa. You couldn't do that sort of thing now. Imagine doing it to a president. The thought of a president brought up visions of a lithographed face nailed on fences, torchlight processions, Republican rallies. Henry in the snow at Canossa was preferable.

Along with it all ran things about herself.

In the convent she had to wear the uniform of black pleated skirt and blouse with tiny collars and cuffs of lawn. It released her from the clothes she had worn in Valhalla, red dresses, stuff dresses that brought out the incompleteness of her face. The black toned her down. Something, good food, the finishing of adolescence, was changing her appearance. Her hair had a luster now. The freckles were disappearing.

She was to have a suit and hat for the street. The suit was blue and the slim slashed sides of the jacket outlined the smoothness of her hips. She was slim. The saleswoman said she had a lovely figure and a feeling of delicious faintness came in Veronika's chest. No one had ever said anything like that before. It was magic. The hat was of blue straw, and from the front to the back of it ran a ridge of tiny crushed pink roses.

"Ah!" said Michael. "Look at Gloria! I always knew you would be a knockout, Ronny."

A shiver went over Veronika from head to foot. These pleasant realities frightened her. She preferred imaginings, where she was safer.

She and Michael discussed things, sitting in the Greek's candy shop, one Saturday night. The Greek was one of Michael's clients and Michael liked to draw him out, make him talk about what he would do if he went back to his own country. The tall slim foreigner, whose

beauty was so wasted in a town which considered all southern Europeans greasy, hung around their table and plied Veronika with favors, begging her choice among boxes of candy whose covers had pictures of high colored ladies with their heads a-tilt, and gayish bows of thin satin ribbon. They always ordered the same things, ginger ale for Michael, caramel sundae for Veronika.

Michael was tired. She could see it in his determination to sit there and be nonchalant and ridiculous. Once in a while he would get up and make the mechanical piano jingle its horrible tunes and call out to the Greek —“That’s a wonderful instrument you have there.” The proprietor would smile with joy and Michael gleaned some amusement.

“After all,” he said to Veronika, “it’s not so different from Rachmaninoff pounding his Steinway for your Aunt Kate to sigh over or Lily diddling scales. Hammers hitting on strings. Why isn’t this simpler? You don’t have to look at anybody anyway. Let’s try it again.”

“You’re awfully tired,” Veronika told him.

He looked derisive.

“You have to worry, don’t you? Solicitude is the sign of the female. Develop it prettily and learn to use it. What are you worrying about me for? Haven’t you got Valhalla and Lily on your mind?”

“You’re not on my mind,” said Veronika. She was no match for him, verbally, but she could follow his absurdities, and she knew that they were not signs of high spirits. There was something in the air which she had not been able to find out about. It had to do with Michael and Michael’s friend at the Army Post.

“What is, then?”

44 A Handmaid of the Lord

"Nothing."

"Not even the bells of the convent—"

"Of course, I'd like to know what's going to happen to me next year. I can't stay in the convent. I ought to be back home now."

"Why ought you?"

"They must need me. One of us. Lily's so much younger. She can stay in the convent. She likes it."

"She can stay there," said Michael, "until she begins to go out and make trouble for men. That's what Lily's due for."

"Will she?"

Veronika wanted him to go on with that, but he dropped it. He was always doing that with her, skipping from subject to subject. She understood perfectly that he did not wish her to understand him, that she was a relief to him because she was so young, and he could pretend she didn't understand and because he liked her.

"I think you should study a lot of things. Not crazy college stuff. But go to places where you could get knowledge."

"Couldn't afford it."

"Oh, yes. Old Francis has got plenty of money. I'll have to fix it up. Ask one of my highbrow friends—my blue-blooded platonic friends. You ought not to stop with the convent. Learn something without the grace of God."

"I haven't any too much of that, yet."

He changed.

"You want to learn about the church," he said. "Please your grandfather. Look at the noble old Roman. His backbone is solid Catholicism. Besides religions help women if they don't begin to whine. See what I mean?"

Veronika, who had sat in the Christian Doctrine class and listened to gentle absolutism and been puzzled, understood perfectly.

They got up and left the Greek's place. Outside, beside the curb, stood Michael's car, and Veronika climbed in. It was late and the city was very still. They went at an incredible rate through the broad streets until they came to a road along the river.

"Home—or a ride?" asked Michael. "Are you tired?"

"A ride—unless Aunt Kate will fuss."

Michael laughed. "She's glad to have you with me, Ronny. There's a family theory that you keep me out of temptation."

She lost most of that.

The road was broad, and they sped along silently. Michael rarely talked when he drove. Once he stopped the car at a bend in the river and they sat silent, watching the moon try experiments with its reflection in the water. On towards the little inn where Fred Hackett served black bass and chicken dinners.

His place was lighted, and outside it stood several cars, army cars, Veronika noted.

"Hell," said Michael, "I was going to take you in." There was suppressed excitement in his tone. "Do you mind waiting just a minute, Ronny?" He left her in the car and went striding up the porch of the inn, tall, dark, incredibly handsome, eager. Veronika waited. She waited until her legs ached and she shifted them, then sat crossways on the seat. He did not come. The car was parked in the shadow under a maple tree, and she could hear the laughter within the inn, see people pass the windows, the neatness of uniformed men, women.

She waited. Then at length she knew that Michael

had forgotten her. He must have forgotten her. She got stiffly out of the car, for one foot had gone to sleep, and made her way to the windows which were near the ground, keeping in shadow lest, within, they see her face. She was right. She saw them all in Hackett's rather bare dining-room, sitting about the long table. Michael had evidently joined a party already gathered, for his chair was drawn up informally beside a woman who faced Veronika. There was a short, red-faced, fat officer—that was Doane—drunken Doane, Veronika had heard Michael say, as they passed him one day, and a tall one with white hair and a clean-shaven face that was full of hard lines—others—women, all in veils and hats. The one next to Michael turned her face towards him and Veronika gazed with something rising higher and higher in her throat. Michael's eyes were smiling at his companion, but his mouth was not. His mouth was almost trembling. The woman's shoulder leaned towards him. Over her hat and drawn loosely over her chin was a motor veil of soft lavender, and her face stood out from its mauve wrappings—delicate, soft but firm flesh, color light in her cheeks, eyes that smiled and lips—Veronika, standing outside, felt her own gawky childishness, moistened the line of red that marked her own mouth. Everything she had ever read of romance was before her. The woman's lips looked as if they had been kissed—often—and Veronika, who had never in her life seen passionate demonstration between men and women, knew that Michael was suffering because he could not kiss them.

She could not bear it. She went back to the shadow of the car and sat hunched in her seat, trying now to keep warm. She remembered the robe in the back of

the car suddenly and pulled it out, wrapping it around her closely. She ached for Michael, but little excited thrills ran over her.

She was asleep.

Michael woke her with his startled exclamation.

"My God, if I didn't forget the child!"

She stirred sleepily.

"I didn't mind waiting," she said. "I guessed you'd forgotten."

CHAPTER V

I

"Now of my three score years and ten
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score
It only leaves me fifty more."

VERONIKA chanted it challengingly. Fifty more—they stretched out endlessly, like packages to be untied, boxes to be opened. She loved the thought of the fifty, each neatly marked "Veronika Pearse" and lying ready in some eternity. They were beautiful boxes, she was sure of that. Not like the ragged, battered boxes that waited for some people. Hers were neat and each a little larger than the one preceding it, as was proper.

That was as they had been for the last three years. The first box had held the year of convent and the climactic end of it when she had become a Catholic. Michael had given her her watch. The agony and joy and disturbance of that first communion was gone now, dimming in remembrance. The slim gold watch remained, on a ribbon on her wrist.

The second year. Years began in September and ended in June, college years. January was artificial. In between September and June lay summer in Valhalla. Valhalla was unchanged except for strange excrescences of new wealth and social endeavors. The hotel had a roof garden. But after the tangled, painful summer she had come back to Westover to college. Nothing, not even the scenes at the train, could prevent her. She went to

Michael's house for her shore vacations, to stay with his old mother and Aloysius. This was an Easter holiday. They had all thought that the friction would be too great if her grandfather felt that some one from his house was attending a Protestant college, the college which skirted Westover. Lily stayed at her grandfather's house for week-ends.

"You know of course it will mean that Lily will get the old man's money?" asked Michael.

"Don't talk that way," said Veronika.

"It's important," said Michael rather sharply. "Kate has her own little bit of money. She's independent. Aunt Anne will die any time. If Lily is in a convent and you're in a college it will mean that Lily will get what money there is. And between us I think there may be quite a bit."

"I don't care about the money," scorned Veronika. "I'd a lot sooner have Lily get it, if she does. Besides I hate talking about a live person's money. But I do hate to hurt him. He's so old and he believes it so. Doesn't he see that if I'm ever to earn my living I'll have to have more than convent? That even father wants it—"

"Well, you can't change him, you know."

"I know the way he feels though," Veronika finished.

Yet she had gone to college and Lily had stayed in the convent and learned to sing.

The third year. The last box she had opened. Mostly it had college in it, intimations of learning, sudden friendships, triumphs that had flattened, disappointments that were now stingless. College was well enough, but it paled beside the things she learned from Michael. She

knew his friends now. She knew the people at the Army Post. And the plastic Lily, who seemed to have lost all traces of Valhalla, and was slim and beautiful still, wore a black dress with the broad band of blue of the Children of Mary across her breast. When she sang the Adeste at Christmas people had wept at its sweetness. Yet, for all that, even though she knew the nuns hoped Lily would enter, Veronika was far from sure. Lily told her things she held from the others.

Tom was in the last box too. She had found him last vacation, no longer a surly handsome boy, but a young man, using his father's house as he did his father's purse, without sentiment, for his convenience. He too had given her confidence. He was full of young man aspirations and plans to be carried out at sufficient distance from Valhalla. He hated, as did Lily, the shabbiness, the ill-repair, the confusion and shame of the house where they had been brought up and where the genius was still disorder. Veronika knew they were right. But she could not destroy a lurking feeling of loyalty to Valhalla. She had secret visions of changing the whole place, making it over into a home for them all. Ugly as it was, it was her own.

Fifty more springs—enough to do anything that she might wish. Birthdays give you a sense of power, thought Veronika.

She went to her grandfather's house to find Lily. The old man was sitting, as he always was, in the back parlor that was also library. High ranges of books covered the walls. He sat by the table in his chair. His arteries were hardening and he knew it. As his time grew nearer to shake off all mortal connection he determined to discount mortality more and more. The shrewd house-

holder in him had insisted on perfect arrangement of his affairs. But that was done and he sat all day now in his brown leather chair, shabby and decrepit, fixing his mind on a second life that must also be definite in all its arrangements.

Veronika stood by his chair.

"I brought you some Prince Albert," she said, dropping the little tin can of tobacco on the table beside him.

"Here's the skeptic," answered her grandfather; "here's the one who courts the heresies of the prince of darkness."

Veronika sat down beside him. She had adopted something of Michael's way, without his impudence.

"But I haven't missed Mass once," she told him. "Think what an example I am to the unbelievers."

Under that ever thicker thatch of eyebrow his eyes twinkled at her almost merrily.

Lily came in. She had the little mannerisms of the convent now, the quiet walk, the careful sitting position.

"I had such a time getting away," she said, "but I would do it. So they let me at last." And she smiled, her lovely free smile that set her face in motion.

Veronika knew that Lily had done it by simple insistence that she would, not by raising her voice or making trouble. Her ways were subtler.

"How are the holy women?" asked Mr. Pearse.

Lily shot a quick glance at Veronika. She had come to the point at which the holy women rather bored her. But she answered with gay courtesy. "You follow the ways of God," said her grandfather, "but your sister does not. Why don't you try to influence her?"

Again his eyes sparkled. Veronika had an inkling that sometimes came to her that her grandfather was fond

of her, also that he would have liked to see a good pitched battle between skeptic and believer.

But Aunt Kate was there now and would have no more of religion. She understood the need and also the place for devotion, and while it was natural for old people to become absorbed in religion they should not be allowed to be nuisances. Aunt Kate bustled through life reasonably. She had been one of a large family and had seen the family scatter. She knew the taste of tragedy; she knew the inevitable pick-up of life after tragedy; she knew upheaval and trouble, and she had woven all these things into a huge workaday emotional apron which she wore and which family troubles and difficulties might spot so long as she could preserve in cleanliness her dress underneath the apron, a dress of sentiment and romance which was oddly unfitted to her spreading hips and the loose flesh beneath her chin. She had come into the dower of the motion pictures late and she loved them. In the dark of the cinema house she could quiver and weep a little and reflect on the terrible but enthralling vices of the world.

She had learned to love Lily and romanticized her. But in speaking of her fondness for Lily she always added "fond of Lily and Veronika too."

In Aunt Kate's room Lily was speaking of the dance at the Army Post.

"Reverend Mother wouldn't want you to go," Aunt Kate reminded her.

"I must go," said Lily. "Simply must. I haven't worn that new dress of mine once, Aunt Kate. Ronny's going."

"Veronika's twenty. Besides she will be with her cousin."

"She'll be with Stewart Royden, won't you, Ron?"

Veronika laughed at her aunt's face, mixture of dismay and pride.

"We're to be a party," she explained. "It's Stewart's party. I can take Lily along as well as not. She'll spend the night with me."

This was formality. Lily meant to go, and the girls knew that their aunt was flattered that they were to be in Stewart Royden's party.

"I've a present for you, Ron," said her sister.

She unwrapped it herself, and it fell from the thin tissue paper, a great length of chiffon dyed to the color of a leaping flame.

"Hemstitched it myself. Like it?"

"It's gorgeous—beautiful. And what a strange thing to come out of a convent. But you should keep it."

"Can't wear the color," said Lily ruefully.

She knew exactly, as she stood there in her black serge dress, what colors she should wear. Even the chrysalis of black was fitting.

"I'd wear that color if I couldn't." Veronika threw the scarf about her shoulders.

Her sister looked at her appraisingly.

"You know you are good-looking," she answered. "Your eyes are good and your whole brown tone is good." But as she spoke Lily's eyes strayed to herself in the mirror. She despised Aunt Kate's mirror, but she forgot and looked in it. The glass had a blotch in it halfway up.

"Some day I shall throw a stone through that looking-glass," she warned Aunt Kate. "It's actually worse than the convent ones and they're made especially so you'll take the veil!"

Veronika trod lightly through things that happened all day. She often tried to step quietly through events so that she might not arouse any ill luck. Because, if your good luck persisted too long, something unpleasant was sure to happen and she wanted this one day to be perfect.

She hoped that Michael would be gay. One couldn't be sure of him any more, and there were plenty of reasons why. He knew that people talked about him, but that would not have done more than amuse him. But Veronika, strengthening her knowledge of people and events every day, was not sure that the old affair with Captain Tracy's wife had not been revived. Michael didn't trust Mary Tracy, but he couldn't keep away from her. That was what Aloysius said. Aloysius Pearse, Michael's sick brother, regarded them from his padded chair, Lily and Veronika, dressed for the party. Lily's dress, a wisp of gold-colored cloth, managed to be more sophisticated than Veronika's. Yet Veronika was at her best. Her dress was pale green chiffon and Veronika had planned its making. It hung straight and slim from under her hardly defined breasts, and tiny caps of sleeves covered the ridges of her shoulders.

"It has no style at all—that dress," said Lily of the convent, "and yet it does bring you out, Ronny."

Veronika, who was flushed because she had forgotten warnings and used soap and water on her face, wheeled for the benefit of Aloysius.

"Am I gorgeous?"

"No—Lily's gorgeous. You have what my respected and disreputable brother would call charm."

The sight of Aloysius became suddenly distinct, sitting there humped in his chair, his mind running over them all, sentient, feeling as clearly as Michael, but unable to do anything with his feelings except to resolve them into clever phrases. Veronika was disturbed by the fact of contrast, but one had to be careful not to show sympathy to Aloysius. It seemed that if he could get nothing but pity and solicitude from life he preferred to be destitute of relationship to it. He could distance Michael in abusive raillery, and Michael never gave him any of the conventional lowering of stringent tone when he came in contact with the invalid. Michael's mockery and abuse were two things that kept Aloysius alive.

"Keep away from that blonde to-night, Mick," Aloysius urged sardonically, as Michael came downstairs, his good looks and slightly thickening figure outlined in black and white.

"That is not in my hands, Brother Aloysius."

"If she whistles you will run."

"If she whistles," agreed Michael, "though she's going off somewhat in her looks. Her powder no longer assimilates well and she has a faint line here"—he drew an imaginary one under the curve of Lily's chin—"here where the fair Lily has none."

"One of my consolations," said Aloysius, "is that, though afflicted with a hump, I shall not be the principal figure in a divorce suit."

"You don't know what you miss," chuckled Michael.

Veronika liked to hear them talk that way. She liked to feel that the thing could be talked about. It made it so much less ugly. Sitting beside Stewart Royden half an hour later, in his car, joggling along toward the army post, she discovered that her mind was still on Michael.

It was his romance which interested her vicariously rather than this possibly present one of her own. Her own seemed too unlikely. Stewart was not talking. He was puffing at a cigarette as he drove the coupé. He rarely made an effort unless he had to, and Veronika knew that the burden lay on her. But she could think only of absurd beginnings. Suppose she began with any of the things that stumbled through her mind, that she wondered how women made themselves irresistible like Mary Tracy. That her dress had cost twenty-three dollars and she had to get through April on seventeen she had left, that if Stewart could see her mother fighting he might not descend that stone Parrish-like flight of stairs that led to the Royden house and come for her. She wondered if he had ever been on the verge of a divorce. One couldn't begin conversation with that. She had to begin pretty soon. After waiting this long one should say something clever. "Here we are," said Stewart, stopped the car and got out to help her. "You'll have to jump over that puddle. I parked right in the wrong place, per usual." He held out both arms as if to a child, and as she jumped from the car step to the sidewalk, caught her, one firm hand on each side of her waist. He held her and smiled.

There was still the old worry. Across the mess hall, where they danced, she saw Lily float off with an officer. How did she learn to dance like that? In a convent! She wouldn't make any mistakes. In her mind Veronika had insisted on deferring this moment when she would have to dance as well as she could and perhaps be unsuccessful.

It wasn't so bad with Stewart. She had memorized

that little walk with which he always started as if he were fitting his hand to the back of her waist. Besides he wouldn't care. There she was, on his foot.

"I am sorry," she said. "I always get on people's feet."

"No—" he said, rather comfortingly, "you don't, and besides you can if you like. I don't mind at all. Here—drop the college girl stuff. Let me lead."

He led so easily. He walked her around, kept her held tight. Mrs. Tracy swept her up and down with her slow smile as she passed. Veronika guessed that she too knew that Stewart was being kind to his partner.

Quickly she tried to measure other things up against the importance of this. An old trick and one which had failed her often. Life was deeper than this, farther in than this. But suppose this were the hedge you must penetrate if you were to get at it. Priests in the pulpit, professors at their desks telling you about living. But when you came actually to living, you were fenced in perhaps because your feet didn't go in easy rhythms. Because you couldn't remember.

"Don't dance with me—don't you see I can't?" she said suddenly to Stewart.

It was her tone that stopped him, faint in melodrama. He stopped at the wall—he was making her circle walls—and laughed delightedly. His face, sagged a little with the look of a man who has anticipated his next half-hour, sprang back to interest. His eyes smiled down at her, gray, accustomed eyes meeting hers which were blue like little pools of tragedy.

"You mustn't take it so seriously!" he laughed. "Don't work at it."

"You can't help working when it doesn't come easily. When you tread on people and your face gets hotter and hotter."

"Come, we'll go get cool."

"Already!" she sighed. "I'll be doing it all evening. Always," she added, as they went off, "I am sure that next time it will be easy and I'll float along like Lily. Then some one does something you don't expect—you turned twice there—"

She was conscious that he was hardly listening. His eyes were on her, but they were abstracted—as if he were figuring something out about her. He looked as old as Michael now—looked thirty. Not as good looking as Michael—a little too square in the shoulders, but clever, rich, sought after.

"Listen—I'm not going to spoil your evening," declared Veronika, "you take me out there in one of those comfortable leather chairs and go back and dance. I'll just sit for a while." She was eager. She put her hand on his shoulder, urging him. Suddenly his hand leapt to catch hers and moved it, pressed it into his coat. She felt his heart scudding heavily along.

"Don't do that sort of thing, Veronika," he said, "it's dangerous."

She said nothing, only stood looking at him as he still held her hand close to him. And her own heart began to trip faster, in uneven rhythm like her dancing.

"You know," Stewart told her, "Mick's given me my order. He says I'm to leave you alone. That you're too young. But I'm not sure I shall."

"Too young for what?" asked Veronika, and sliced years off her actual age by that definiteness.

Stewart let her hand drop. They were standing in a

little alcove, and other people who had finished the dance were coming out.

She was dancing now with Colonel Tracy, who was telling her how beautiful Lily was. Colonel Tracy was white-haired and immaculate. His skin was brown and neat, nicer than the skin of most young men. Veronika thought that if she had been married to him she would not have flirted with other men. Colonel Tracy slowed her to a waltz. That was easier. How decent men were and how humiliating it was when they had to be decent about your dancing. She knew that he was glad it was over. He led her to his wife and Michael.

Veronika spoke to Mrs. Tracy, who was pleasant to her, and she thought that Michael had been lying when he said the powder showed. It showed so little on Mary Tracy's beautifully pale cheeks that you wanted to stroke them. The line beneath her chin must have been one of Michael's brutalities too. There was no line. She showed no trace of age except that the passage of time had worn off all irregularities of manner, all gaucheries. Her voice was lazy and her eyes were slow. Before her Veronika always felt half finished and fidgety. And Mary Tracy made her think of things that she knew were true, had read in books and papers, seen on the stage, that happened between men and women. She watched Mrs. Tracy raise her eyes to Michael, caught his answering glance, mocking, beseeching, scornful, wholly pitiful. Veronika knew that mockery and scorn. It was the mask for the things that hurt—like the crippled back of Aloysius, like—this.

Lily, in perpetual motion, was doing an intricate dance with a thin young officer, who looked amazingly wooden as he went forward, back, and bent his knees a little,

working out some pattern. Lily wove around him like gold leaf on wood.

It was time to dance again with Stewart.

"Shall we dance, Ronny?"

It was the first time he had called her Ronny.

"Do you think we should?"

"Not in the least. What would you like?"

"A breath of air," she said, "because it's spring. Then possibly two large plates of salad."

He took her program and his out of his pocket and looking at them tore the bits of pasteboard across.

"Let's play by ourselves."

Outside they strolled down the cement walk which fronted the stupid red brick officers' houses. They differed, as did the officers, only in formal ranking, in size. Otherwise they were all alike. On Colonel Tracy's house a porch light burned and some early moths buzzed around it. Below in the barracks some one was playing a banjo badly and an evidently ecstatic quartet was singing to it—cheap love songs. They strolled slowly, listening.

"I'm twenty to-day."

"Last time I asked I was told you were nineteen. I'm glad you're twenty."

"Why?" It was Veronika's first coquettish remark. She knew why. She knew why he had torn up those programs and why it was stirring to walk beside him.

"Because I'm not a cradle snatcher," he answered shortly. "And because I'm thirty. Which is quite enough difference."

She wanted to ask "difference for what," but refrained. Because it was the only remark that occurred to her she said nothing at all. They walked on and, half expectant, half trembling, she waited for him to

go on. Having some one in love with you was not the easy, gracious business she had imagined. It was very fragmentary and very lumpy.

Outside where the entrance to the post began under the little stone bridge they saw a soldier come whistling. Beyond him a girl went off into the darkness. Not a girl—the white skirt of a girl, the symbol of a girl. Veronika felt very sad and unfamiliar and uninformed. She sighed as they regained the walk up to the dance hall.

And Stewart asked—"Are you cold?" Her cape was floating out around her, for she liked the wind on her neck. He stopped and, standing in front of her, pulled it close.

"Silly child," he said, and fumbled for a hook. There was no hook and as he bent to look for one he pressed his lips to her bare chest just where her dress fell from it. Everything in Veronika sunk, then rose and scrambled. She held her hand to the place as if she had been burned. They were in the gas light. Now she was eating chicken salad. She was conscious of wanting to be unable to eat and conscious of wanting that salad. Stewart hovered. Sometimes, as they were eating, his knee touched hers, and once his hand was on her shoulder. Each time she jumped.

People came and spoke to her, asked her about college, asked her if she knew this or that girl. She tried to force interest in what they said and knew she was failing. Her eyes sought for Michael.

"Want to go?" asked Stewart.

She did, and asked him to find Michael. He gave a comprehensive glance over the room and left it.

Veronika felt quite alone, not at all as she thought she should feel when twenty and with Stewart Royden

in love with her. The officers fox-trotted by her. Sadness still hovered over her. She had tried to have an unblemished day, and she was sad because so many things were beyond her reach and unexplained and because she could not be as Lily, gay and young and floating by as youth should float. Her first kiss was a hot spot on her chest. Her first intimation of love had been the crossness of a man. And Michael had disappeared somewhere with Mary Tracy.

From the suavity of Stewart, as he returned, she knew that something was wrong. His manner was built up to conceal something, but she had played that game herself and knew it well.

"We're to go home without Michael?" she asked.

"He'll be along later, he says."

What was it? Lily's presence barred everything, Stewart's possible love-making as well as explanations. She was afraid of explanations and Lily was like the tunes running in her golden head, blithe and repetitive and reminiscent.

Veronika would not let the pressure of Stewart's hand be significant. There was something about Michael and Mary Tracy—something she should worry about. Stewart was too protective.

She lay awake until she heard the turn of Michael's latchkey, then put on a bathrobe and went down to meet him. But when she saw Michael she knew that was a mistake. He was flushed and his eyes were bright and not in the least tired. He looked like a man just emerged from a successful fight.

"Well, Veronika," he asked, "what's wrong?"

When he called her Veronika he was trying to get rid of her. She did not know how to begin.

"I thought maybe something had happened to you."

"Stewart said he'd take you home. I was—detained." His words were sharp and determined to tell her nothing. Still she stood looking at him, loath to go.

"Did you have a good time?" she asked.

She was annoying him. He did not want her interruption to whatever line of thought he was engaged in.

"Did you?" he asked. "You weren't dancing very well."

And though she had known and admitted it still it hurt her. She discovered the vein in herself that was identical with his.

"At least," she flared, "if any one made love to me it was some one who had a right to do it."

"Why, you little wretch," said Michael under his breath, then laughed an ugly, solitary laugh. "Like all the rest of them, aren't you? They scuttled off to-night like rats when they got wind of the news."

"What news?"

Michael lit a cigarette and regarded her coldly.

"Mrs. Tracy is to be divorced by her husband and I shall marry her."

3

They all knew. Grandfather Pearse denouncing, not the divorce and its cause, oddly enough, but the threat of Michael's subsequent marriage to a divorced woman; Aunt Kate shocked, but living in whispered colloquies with other aunts which seemed engrossing; Lily, packed back to the convent quickly as if for purification, before the newspapers began to carry their stories. Only four days since the Post dance which had ended with the ugly incident Veronika had not seen and which the

newspapers retailed so juicily. The break had come at the Colonel's house. Veronika remembered how peaceful the house had seemed that night with the moths buzzing around the porch light. The violence didn't matter after all. Neither the violence nor the things it stood for, still so nebulous in Veronika's mind. What she couldn't bear were the letters. It seemed incredible that the lean, brown, suavely-civil Colonel could have given these letters to the newspapers. Yet there they had been, the three of them, in the morning papers for people to read and jeer over. Those three letters so unlike Michael that you wouldn't have believed he had written them at all unless you had known all along that underneath the mockery and debonair carriage just such softness lurked. Three letters—two years old—why had Colonel Tracy waited so long? What had happened in the meantime?

In the early evening Veronika walked down the street. She had to get away from the house; from the questions of Michael's mother, from the satires of Aloysius, from the occasional sight of Michael's own black face as he came home late.

On a corner the newsboy was crying his papers. The evening papers would have the letters too. She saw a man stop and buy one and roll it up carelessly, stuff it into his pocket with the Pearse-Tracy letters to be digested later— He would sit beside his living room lamp and read Michael's letters—written two years ago to Mary Tracy in New Orleans.

“DEAR HEART:

“I write so badly—I have never learned to be articulate and yet if I do not try I shall starve

while you are gone. Letters are madness, but not to write them worse madness. For when I write it seems as if again I can sound the depths of your sweetness . . . now I know the reality of all the absurdities in the world and all the delights—”

This morning Michael had said to Aloysius:

“I see they’ve printed all that putrid rot. Can you imagine how any one can be such a damned fool as to write to a woman anyhow?”

Veronika confronted the newsboy.

“I want all your papers.”

“The whole bunch?”

Even at only three cents apiece it mounted up to all the change in her purse. She rolled the heavy bundle up and held it under her arm till she reached the bridge. Then she dropped them over the rail and watched them float and tumble and toss in the strong spring current.

4

It was dark when she reached Michael’s house again, the house that seemed to be strange now that the gayety had dropped out of her relationship with Michael, now that she knew he was going to marry Mary Tracy. Outside two poplars trembled, rustling like the whispering tongues of gossiping women. She stood for a minute in the narrow hallway and looked at the letters. There was one from Valhalla. She hoped very much it had a check inside it. Lily wanted money and there was her own term tuition due when she got back. She read

the letter twice and then went into the parlor, where Aunt Kate sat in conclave with Michael's mother. Aloysius, sitting under his strong reading lamp, held a book.

They were all casual for a moment. Then—

"Did you hear from your father, Veronika?" asked Aunt Kate.

"Yes."

"I had a letter from Francis too. It's too bad, just when things seemed to be going a little better with him. Just what does he mean by low-grade ore?"

"There's no money in it. His holdings are too small," explained Veronika.

"I don't know what to do," said Aunt Kate sadly.

Mrs. Pearse rocked. "We must ask Michael."

Veronika stiffened. "No," she answered quickly. "You mustn't bother Michael with this. Positively not. Father wrote me too that he really thought she (the old italics of her childhood returned) should not be alone. We must go home. At once."

She caught Aloysius's eyes upon her.

"Well," said Aunt Kate, "we all want to do what's best, dear. There's nothing between you and Stewart Royden?"

"Nothing."

"If I had the money I'd insist on your finishing this year. But you know how it is. I've had hardly any dividends—this winter. I do think though that Lily should stay because you see she has only one more year. And she's frail, Ronny. Don't you think yourself she ought to stay? Her grandfather would gladly pay the convent tuition—"

Veronika's hand passed over her forehead in an oddly

mature gesture. It was all clear and yet it had to be tangled to be kindly. If Stewart Royden was engaged to her then they would have made her stay, money or no money. Or if she had been in a convent. Or if she had been Lily. But there were only Michael and Aloysius—one crippled and helpless—the other preoccupied—who could have helped her.

She smiled at Aloysius.

"I really have to go home anyway," she said. "I'll write the people at college—or run over for a few days and pack the rest of my things. You're right about Lily. She'd better stay just where she is. I fancy father can take care of her bills all right, Aunt Kate."

As they went to supper, Aloysius detained her for a moment.

"You hold on to yourself till Michael gets back."

"Where's he gone?"

"He went to Albany this afternoon to dodge this racket in the papers for a few weeks. Had to."

"I see," said Veronika slowly. "Then I guess I won't see him again, will I?"

CHAPTER VI

I

IN the confessional the wooden slide behind the little grating slid back. Veronika was alone before the priest in the darkness, in a still, imminent darkness. She could hear the low words of blessing and feel the coldness of her own clasped hands. Out of her mind sped the things that she had arranged there so neatly, the order of her offenses, the sins she must not forget, the controversial questions that she meant to raise in defense.

"How long since your last confession?" came the kind, easy voice.

It was always long since Veronika's last confession. She stumbled along, guided by his soft questioning.

"I am not sure that I believe—I doubt everything, question everything."

"That you have come here shows that you do believe, my child. We must all pray for faith. . . . Make a good act of contrition." She was absolved. The grating slid again, the barrier between her and the explanation she was always seeking. She turned and lifted the curtain and as she did so a black-coated Irish woman, muttering rapid Hail Marys, pushed past her to take her place. What would she confess, Veronika wondered? She could have no doubts, no troublesome affairs of love. For the rest—it is only the young who sin, thought Veronika suddenly.

She flung herself into a pew and bent her head close on her arms to shut out sights, sounds, everything except the closeness of absolution. She was absolved. She must accept it. But her thoughts searched out those sins she had forgotten in those minutes of excitement. She had omitted the one she had keyed herself up to tell, the one she hated to admit to herself. She had hunted for some way of evading it, but the law stood out—"immodesty in thought." Those dreams she cherished after waking, with their strange seductive images belonged in her confession. She had forgotten to tell of them. Forgotten or concealed. She searched her mind relentlessly. Forgotten. The sin was clear then in the sight of God and she had been spared the telling.

All around her people filed in and out of the confessionals, most of them accustomedly, formally, with an air of habit. Here and there knelt some one in sorrow or contemplation, but for the most part the penitents knew the path to grace and trod it calmly. In the church with its lights flickering on the dim altars and the outlines of the saints wavering in their niches and hidden priests patiently and dispassionately unloading sheaves of human frailty, Veronika was out of place. Relief came to her too slowly.

Her thoughts began blurring. Clouding the sharp actuality of self-perception that she called conscience was the delicate haze of people and events. She raised her head. The quivering skeleton feather in the hat of a woman ahead of her held her eye, someone's forgotten glove lying in the pew beside her. It was a good glove. The owner would want it. Should she give it to the sexton? She thought with sympathy of the person who had lost it, and then suddenly conscious that her mind

was no longer on her offenses, pulled it back again. Stiff with fatigue, for she had knelt long before she went into the confessional, she rose at last and went out through the church door. The abnegation in her manner melted into peace in the cool evening breeze. She lifted her chin and almost unconsciously her fingers directed the soft sweep of hair at the side of her hat.

That was for the man who might appear, the man lurking always now in the chances of Veronika's day. He was the unsolved question that made life stimulating and bracing. As she went toward her father's house, down the half-dark streets where houses bordered the sidewalk closely, though she still held the peace of her conscience close to her, all the delight of things that had not happened was stirring in her. She sought the principal street deliberately, though she could have flagged her street car on a side crossing. The main street had white way lights, round electric globes set proudly at intervals and the plate glass of the shop windows shone and glittered. Strips of mirror in the windows showed Veronika to herself as she walked by them, young, smooth-haired under the slanting hat, but charming most because of that untried suppleness of her body which showed so clearly that she had not yet undergone any of woman's physical exhaustions.

She was waiting on the corner for a street car when Saul spoke to her.

"School keep late to-night?" he said at her elbow.

She turned quickly to face the tall, lean, young man with smiling eyes.

"Not school. I've been to church."

"You should have taken me."

"Didn't you have something to do?"

"Not much. Waiting for some information before I can go on much farther."

They paused. Little stops in their conversation were always happening like this. They embarrassed Veronika. She wanted this tall young architect, Saul Griffin, to keep his distance for a while yet. The unspoken possibilities of the "yet" were enchanting, when it was clear he could not keep away from her.

"I have to hurry home. I'll be late for dinner."

"Let me ride with you."

That was all right, but she wanted him to leave her at the street corner. She was not too sure of the state of things at home. Besides she did not want to get muddled emotionally to-night. She wanted to hold fast to the thought of the confession, a clean garment wrapped around a clean soul.

"Not to-night."

"But it's desolate. Let me come up for a little while after dinner then. If you knew what I'll be condemned to if you don't."

"I must go back to school. There's a dance there. Neighborhood boys and girls. I have to supervise."

"Let me come with you."

She shook her head. "They don't take me seriously with a man hanging around."

He laughed, his almost too boyish laugh.

"Well, if I don't hang around, may I call for you?"

"That's different again. If you like."

The house was dark when she reached it. No light warning or welcoming anywhere. She found her latch-

key and pushed her way into the hallway, chilled in the darkness. In the living room there were the remains of last night's fire in the fireplace, three or four burnt logs. It was a stale-looking scene, as was the dining-room, where the breakfast cloth still lay on the table and the kitchen, where a pile of soiled dishes stood on the drying board covered with a dish towel. Veronika regarded it, a lump of self-pity in her throat. Here she was tired after a long day in the High School and she must play domestic servant as well as every other part, with no sympathizing audience, with no one who cared how hard everything was.

Grimly she lit the gas under the gas heater for hot water and went to take off her hat and coat and get to work. Upstairs the same disorder was apparent. The sheets streamed over the foot boards of the beds. Her mother had gone off somewhere without a thought of housework. Veronika flung a smock over her dress and pulled the sheets up fiercely on the bed in her room. It was while she was doing it that she noted the letters which had been placed on her desk, one from Lily, now studying singing in New York, one from Georgia Collingwood, who had been her best friend at college and now seemed as remote after a year as if she had been known in a previous incarnation, and one from Stewart Royden. How he did hang on, she thought idly. She read the other letters first, but they had no news of interest. Then Stewart's, which brought a frown to her forehead. She didn't want him to come West. She didn't want him to see Valhalla. Why did he insist? He only pretended it was business. She tried to get a clear picture of Stewart as he had seemed in that last interview which they had had in Westover when she

had hurled doubts at him until even his desire had wavered. Yes, it was queer that he hung on!

The housework immersed her. Beds, dishes, a light turned on here and there, a few manipulations of the carpet sweeper over the rugs, but it was so futile. There were times when she could avoid that thought of futility and be comfortable just because things were done, but to-night nothing helped. The edges of the rugs curled up to mock at her, a torn piece of wall paper in the dining-room flapped. In the ice box she found pork chops and put them in a skillet, heating another for the pile of cold potatoes she meant to fry. The ugliness of the meal depressed her more and more. She found the lettuce limp and ugly and flung it into the sink drainer.

There had been few visible changes in the house since Veronika and Lily were children. The buffet mirror reflected the Pearse family as they sat at the dinner an hour later. Dr. Pearse, thin-haired, fat-paunched, stooped at the shoulders, eating hurriedly and nervously and silently. Opposite him sat his wife pouring herself cups of tea, one after another, and arguing about Lily, arguing with herself because her husband would not join in contention. Between them was Veronika eating silently like her father, but ashamed of the abnormality of her silence. She did not dare to speak. She knew the kindling that counter remarks might make, the sudden blaze of conflagration and anger. To-night above all things she desired peace and to get to communion in the morning with her soul still clean.

She asked her father if he had heard from Tom. Yes, he said, Tom was coming up from the university

to-morrow to spend the day, driving up with some friend of his.

"I should think he'd know better," said Veronika under her breath.

That she knew accounted for her mother's comparative silence to-night. She was secretly pleased because Tom was coming. But Veronika had a vision of a long day of meal getting, of expecting quarrels, dodging them, encountering them.

She pushed back her chair and spoke to her mother.

"I have to hurry and get back to school. There's a dance there that I am supervising. You'd better do these dishes before Tom comes."

"Not much, young lady, I'm not so young as you are! Let your father get a good girl in here to do them."

Veronika left the dining-room just as the voices of altercation began. She knew every inflection from the indignant to the whining and hated them all. Upstairs she slipped from her suit and blouse into a dress of dull blue satin, plainly made. The one satisfaction of all this hideous year was that she was earning enough money to buy clothes and indulge an occasional fancy. It made up just a little for the long, empty days in the classroom, trying to interest elaborately and absurdly dressed girls and shuffling boys in nineteenth-century prose, for the nervous worry and discomfort of her home, for the ache that came sometimes for fine, free spring days on the college campus, for gay conversations with Michael in Westover. At first she had dreamed of changes, or trying to be tolerant with her mother and making life happier for her father, but those dreams faded. Even when she had a chance with her father she couldn't find ground on which they could meet. He

was reactionary, distrustful. Every new development in medicine was fake. Every change in politics a sign that the country was going to the devil. It was petty pessimism, built of complaints and personal dissatisfactions and failures. Veronika suspected sometimes that he enjoyed his sense of having been personally injured by the world, and then that feeling was loyally swept away by her realization that he had truly been badly treated and had little to show for years of effort. As she went out of the door she could hear the controversy in the dining-room rising higher and higher. She shut the door tightly and hurried. Ever since she had been very young she had always hurried away from the house. Too often noise penetrated the walls.

On the corner and two blocks away was the Lewis house, huge and square and made of yellow brick. From early admiration Veronika had come to know how ugly it was and to realize that Ellie Lewis was a fool and never would be anything else. But that made the irrepressible clutch of something like envy all the harder as she looked at the big cars at the curb outside the house, the lights in the windows of the dining-room and the living-room. People from Duluth were there probably, or from St. Paul, clever men interested in the Coldbreath mine, and Ellie was regaling them with talks of her travels in Europe. Ellie, scuttling through Europe, might be as absurd as possible, but after all it was continental travel. Ellie's home was full of light and luxury and order, not inhabited by people who tore at each other's souls all the time.

Sometimes the wet sidewalks meant romantic isolation. But to-night they made Veronika conscious of loneliness.

The moon had risen and from one of the little hills she could see in the distance the open pit mine which lay closest to the city, a great rough excavation like an eternally unhealed sore. Little lights skipped around in the hole, tail lights of cars on the narrow tracks which skirted its ledges, bent on some night errand. Beyond the dim window lights of the houses in the location near the mine spotted the darkness. Veronika could see for miles from her little eminence. She leaned her elbows on the wooden fence that protected the sidewalk and rested for a moment. She always wondered at what she saw. Incomplete, rough, almost inexhaustibly rich and yet yielding only poverty on the outskirts, it was endless food for reverie. Nature and God and muddle-headed men were all before her in their ill-managed partnership.

The school waited for her. Already she could see the lights blazing there and went on. The school was unbelievable. Flanked in the blocks on either side by small, peaked, frame houses, fronted by them, it rose, seemingly from a field, immense in beauty, perfect in design, its lawns and playgrounds parked with skill and then meeting in absurd and anti-climax, vacant lots where tin cans rolled at the feet of billboards. That was Valhalla. Its High School, three-million-dollar structure, faced by ill-painted board houses, was only one of the paradoxes which the revenue of the mine and the greed of tax administrators were always committing.

The immense and beautiful school entrance dwarfed Veronika, and she was no more important in the shadows of its great columns than the giggling boys and girls who commenced to file in. Inside one forgot Valhalla. That was the trick of the High School. In the middle of the

entrance hall was a cast of Joan of Arc, the dreaming Joan, looking down at the boys and girls who filed past her without a glance, each boy clinging to his girl's arm in gesture of possession. In the upper hall, where they danced, mural paintings by a great artist topped the gray cedar panels. Veronika hung her coat and hat in the teachers' cloakroom and went down to take up her work of chaperonage. The task, in its distant relationship to spying, always oppressed her a little and she tried to minimize some of its phases. It flattered her that the students liked to have her at the dances and she too liked to be there and hear the music play accompaniments to her imaginings.

Up and down the hall the boys and girls waved, and in a comfortable wicker chair Veronika presided, smiling at some of her favorites now and then. Her mind stole off to Stewart Royden and to Saul, who would possibly soon be here. Miss Robinson, correcting papers in her own classroom and technically sharing chaperonage, approached to talk things over.

"Where's Elmer More to-night?" she asked. "He and Hazel Hurst never miss anything."

Veronika looked around.

"I saw him somewhere."

When Miss Robinson left her, her thought went back to Elmer and Hazel. Of course she had seen them. She remembered Hazel's black taffeta dance frock of a demureness that was ironic when one considered Hazel's perpetual flirtations. She was wild—every one knew that. At seventeen she was accomplished in an art that Veronika had not yet mastered.

They were not on the floor. Veronika looked downstairs in the prescribed cuddling corners. Then she did

a thing she hated. She looked for Hazel's coat. It was in the cloakroom and the night was chill now. She never would have gone out without it. Miss Pearse, instructor of English, began to feel very responsible, while within her Veronika shrank from her task of hunting the boy and girl. She wanted to tramp upstairs to the classroom and knew she should go softly. After all it was her business to surprise them in whatever they might be up to. But how could she be sure—how could she possibly bear the revelation of it, them, if she should chance on it!

She went softly up the stairs and stood listening. Dark classrooms everywhere, but as she stood listening she caught the faintest sound of a girl's giggle from behind a closed door. Veronika's hand was on the knob. Then in self-protection, not in protection of the children within—she coughed, stamped a little and did not open the door for the fragment of a moment. When, after the slightest pause, she was within and with a quick finger had turned on the lights the boy and girl were revealed by the window standing apart from each other as if frightened. In the boy's face was a half-fearful insolence, but Hazel's cheeks had two red spots and her eyes were curiously dull.

"Of course," said Veronika, heavily, "you have no business up here. Students are never allowed to come upstairs and you both know it. I am amazed. You may go home, Elmer. Home, not hanging around the building, is what I mean. Hazel, you stay and go home with Miss Robinson. I'll see you both to-morrow."

The boy slunk out, scraping his feet. He was nearly as tall as Veronika and as he passed her she held herself

stiffly lest he should detect her trembling. Some courage helped her to watch him out of the building and to relegate the girl to a corner in Miss Robinson's room. Miss Robinson's eyebrows went up, eagerly it seemed to Veronika, in anticipation of detection of some salaciousness. She followed Veronika into the hall.

"What were they up to?"

"Petting," answered Veronika briefly. "I sent Elmer home."

Her head was light with the excitement. She talked with some of the students, tried to control her galloping thought. Pictures—imagination—with horror she remembered that only a few hours ago she had been in the confessional, purifying her mind. She must keep it undefiled until the communion. She tried to recall the lesson for Monday for her English class. Walter Pater on style. That didn't help. Then she would pray. She tried to say the penitential psalms. Heal me, for my bones are troubled. What had the one who sang that been really thinking of? Why were his bones troubled? The psalms set themselves ridiculously to dance music—and the boys and girls, passing her chair, hummed "positively, Mr. Gallagher—absolutely, Mr. Shean."

Miss Robinson went home rather early with her delinquent charge. Veronika was left to dismiss the students and see that the building was in order. Saul came as the last couple departed and she welcomed him now. He was so fine and tall and simple, so handsome in his boyish way, which lacked something of being a man's manner.

"Don't turn off the lights just yet," he begged. "I've simply got to take another look around that assembly

room. There's something about the dome in the roof I want to make sure of. They were discussing it at the meeting to-night."

"For the new building?"

"Yes—we've just about landed the contract."

"So you'll be around here all the time?"

"If I get rich I may buy a lot and build me a house," he teased.

His coming to Valhalla had been accidental, the result of the continual effort on the part of the school board to have unsurpassed schools. The big new grade school building, near the largest mine, was being bid for by various architects and Saul was sent from Chicago by his firm to look the ground over. Then the thing had been tied up with local political upheavals, but Saul had hung on, not too impatient after he met Veronika, not impatient anyway, as pleased apparently with Valhalla as he would have been with Chicago.

Veronika dismissed the janitor.

"Just leave the light in the downstairs hall and put the latch on so that the outer door will lock when we go out. Mr. Griffin wants to take a look at the assembly hall."

The janitor went out. They could hear the click of the door as he closed it, and they climbed to the assembly room, Veronika suddenly conscious that she was alone with Saul in the building.

He prowled about the assembly making estimates, explaining the possible improvements, squinting at the dome in the ceiling.

"Come along," said Veronika, "you've admired it long enough and are sufficiently sure you can do better."

"I'd like to prove it to you, though."

"Oh, I'm a hopeless skeptic. You can't prove anything to me."

"Couldn't I?" He turned out the light and let her precede him into the hall only dimly lit by the reflection from clusters below. And he too seemed aware now of their isolation and caught her arm, pulling her close to him, so that they walked together slowly. She knew that as a prelude to the moment when he would turn her around and hold her so tightly that every quiver of his body would try to pass through hers. Each time she tried to give herself up to that embrace. She liked being embraced and knew that she still missed something of its potency, something that he was getting and she was not. Saul's youth and grace, the simplicity with which his feeling overwhelmed him until he would let her go with a choking laugh and catch her close to him again, all were true and fine.

From below a dim suffusing light traveled up the stairs, but failed in strength before it reached the hallway, so vast in gloom. The silence was intense, broken only by the half-heard ticking of a clock behind the door in the nearest schoolroom. All else was velvety darkness in which the two figures were immersed—life isolated in space and conscious of its power.

"I like it here," said Saul, releasing her. "I like its emptiness and space and the fine faint smell of oil. Let's find a place to sit down and a window to look at the moon and imagine that we are anywhere—"

He left her and opened a classroom door, looking for windows and a glimpse of the moon.

"Here it is," he cried, and went back to bring her to the window which seemed to open on the moonlight. But Veronika shuddered. He had chosen the room

where she had found the boy and girl. Faint hostility to flesh, his or hers—any one's—rose in her.

"Come—before the night watchman thinks we're school robbers!"

"Why will you never be alone with me?" he begged her.

"I am with you."

"And hurrying away with all your might. Why?"

She sat down on the top step of the staircase.

"I don't know why."

"I don't please you. I don't know much about pleasing women. But I've always thought that would be the one thing I could bring to the woman I married—that I don't know."

It touched her. She let him sit down beside her and felt again the warmth of his shoulder.

"This," he told her, "is new. This being close to you and not being able to be close enough—the shiver of delight that is almost fear when you touch me. It's all new. I never have felt that way before," and, more softly, "I never shall again."

"That's tempting fate."

"Don't mock. It's because, whatever happened, it never could be all new again. I would remember that this was what I felt with Veronika. Now there is no memory. We must explore everything—together—won't we, Veronika?"

Veronika did not argue. She let herself sink into the spell as far as she could, the spell of his arms and his voice and his hard, long kisses. All the time she knew she was unreleased and wondered why. Her imagination slumbered. No delight with him yet became delight, despite the idyll that he made his love, and the tenderness

of his approach. She sat beside him and waited for the point to come at which he did sometimes intoxicate her with the fervor of his love and she could respond to him. Now she was too cool—too relaxed.

“Say you love me, dearest.”

She thought lazily that at the moment thousands of men were saying such words to thousands of women, and for thousands of years men had said them nightly to women. It was her turn now and she did not know the answer, so for reply she placed her cheek lightly on his hand.

“I don’t know what love is,” she said at last, “I don’t know much about anything and least about that.”

“You will know,” he said, and his prophecy struck into her as nothing else he had said. She trembled to it, again with her delight in things unknown, and the surety of the swift approach of experience.

“I’ll teach you, my darling.” But from that she shrank away a little. Not yet had she chosen her teacher.

There is no more delicious expenditure of time than that which passes in lovers’ anticipations, even when one is sure and the other unsure. Minutes and half hours slipped by in long intense caresses, in murmurings of controversy, of agreement. Saul told her about himself as they sat on the steps, filling in the outlines of a life which she had known vaguely. His mother had been a saleswoman, a traveling saleswoman, deserted by his father and she had taken her child with her as she made her trips through the country. He had grown up in the atmosphere of country hotels, left when he was a small child in the care of slovenly chambermaids and later allowed to roam more or less by himself about the hotel parlors and little lobbies where he picked up information

about everything and learned to sift the things that were desirable from those that were not. His pale, black-clad, tired and disillusioned mother, eternally straightening and pressing samples of women's underwear had helped him a little. But for the most part his instincts had been sprung from the intense early disgust with which he had learned of and seen viciousness and depravity, nausea which he had never conquered and which had choked curiosities before they had a chance to develop. There had come ambition and desire to do something to help his pale, wearying mother—the inevitable correspondence course, the desultory study of “how to be an architect”—his mother's death and his apprenticeship to the firm where he still was connected. All along the course of his life had been punctuated with friendships and experiences resultant from them. He had gone West on a walking tour one summer and been a harvest hand in Montana—he had spent a summer on Long Island on the estate of a wealthy man as guest of the son of the house whom he had met somewhere. The events of his life were ill-assorted, large and small beads strung on his personality, unrelated to each other. There was no perfected plan. His living was unified only by himself.

Veronika drifted as he talked. She sat with her chin in her hand looking into the faint gloom conscious of what he said and indifferent to it. The present held interest enough to fade the past. When he tipped back her face to kiss it, her eyes were remote.

Every moment passing by thickened the cloud which lay between them and the things of every day, left them more miraculously alone in the building.

“It is a temple of love,” said Saul.

Veronika rose slowly, breaking some spell reluctantly,

but he pulled her back. She felt the fragile fastening of her dress snap open and his hand searching tenderly the hollows of her neck and breast. Panic seized her, again that disgust of flesh, companioned by a strange delight. She struggled free and went swiftly down the stairs to the door. He followed, his impulse frightened away and she heard him snap off the light behind her and close the door. They were outside and a thousand suddenly awakened cautions rose in Veronika. How long had they been there?

The clock on the tower struck a single note and she glanced up at it apprehensively. It was one o'clock.

It seemed to her as if the shades of the little darkened windows opposite were watching her as she came down the broad steps with Saul. She hated the apprehension of something indefinite that rose in her, but it mingled with the memory of the boy and girl whom she had caught in an embrace—or could have caught—

Now Saul would possess himself of her arm. And she felt closer, more animate than she had felt inside the building. They walked slowly along the silent streets until they were about before the clipped barberry hedge that marked the Pearse house. Upstairs there was no light, but she did not dare let him come nearer for fear her mother would be awakened into comment.

"To-morrow?" he asked.

To-morrow rose before her, a long day begun with the communion and confused with the coming of her brother.

"Not to-morrow—I have to go to early church—"

"Let me go with you."

She almost cried out refusal.

"I must be alone—I can't think if I'm not—think

straight of God—and (it probably seems strange to you), but you can't go to communion unless your mind and soul are clean. Even now I wonder if after to-night—I should go?"

"Why?"

"Is it a sin—to love?"

"Sin! It's the holiest thing that has ever happened to me. Take it to God, my darling—"

And still she felt that in the enclosure of his arms, under his hot breath, with his fervent mouth pressed on hers, was not the preparation for things of the spirit. But she said nothing more, for over her, too, faint excitement crept now, and in the unlit street they stood, heart to heart.

When he had left her she opened the front door quietly and turned on the hall light. In the mirror by the stairway she could see her cheeks glowing beautiful beyond denial with the beauty that grew under her lover's touch. She went softly up the front stairs, but her mother heard her. The restless springs of her bed creaked, and she came out to face Veronika, an alarm clock in her hand.

"Where have you been until two o'clock?" she demanded.

Veronika would have pushed past her, but her mother barred the way and the passage was narrow.

"You'll lose your name, my lady—out with that skinny young fellow this hour of the morning! How do you know how many wives he has here and there. Men! That's all they're good for—to ruin young girls—that's all they want—they're a nasty lot—keep away from them!"

Her daughter looked at her wildly. The incoherent woman standing there like a witch, like an ugly thought,

with thin black hair around her bitter face and perhaps some fear, some thought of warning prompting her, seemed like a distortion of Veronika's own terrors.

"Your father never'll do anything for you—and you'll end in the gutter if you run around like this—never trust a man—keeping you out this late and having all the neighbors talking."

"Talking! Haven't they been talking about us for years!"

"That's because your father's a bad man—that's what they say." She padded down the hall in her bare feet to the door of Dr. Pearse's little room rattling the knob.

"Have you any control over your daughter?" she shouted.

Veronika locked her door. She had made a battle for that lock, telling her mother that the first time it was disturbed she would walk out of the house and never come back. It had not been tampered with—yet.

She was tired now. When she had come into the house she had been exalted. That was pricked, and in its place was a stupid confusion of worries and doubts, preyed upon mercilessly by physical exhaustion. Was she sinful? Was anything sin? Ought she go to communion in the morning?

She wanted to go more than anything else. She was willing to drop Saul from her mind to have the surety the communion would give her—the sense of reconciliation, of moral order. There was no sin in a man's kiss—any kind of a kiss—if you didn't do things that involved having children, if you were to be married.

She wished some one would tell her definitely about that, but every one stopped short and she would never, never ask. In the convent you spent the night before

communion in prayer and preparation. So restful—so sweet. She took her rosary to bed with her, and, curling up between her pillows, began to pray. The moonlight struck across her bed.

Saul had said “Take it to God”—his love. At last she was asleep and looking in the moonlight like the slim, pure child she was.

A mile away Saul, who was sleepless, had a vision of her, completely accurate. His arm went out, pretending to hold her.

CHAPTER VII

I

SHE awakened early, but there was little time to dress if she was to get to church for early Mass. Her head was heavy from sleep and the beauty had gone from her face. This morning she was plain and felt plain and her hat persisted in slipping down too far over her face.

Resolutely as she dressed she tried to keep her mind on holy things. She looked away from the mirror and practiced the little maxims of the convent which were to help in a good communion—murmured prayers, abnegations of self, promises and vows of small self-improvements. She would offer up everything she did to-day. She would make it a good day in spite of Tom's coming and the complications. They would have strawberry mousse for dinner. There would be time to make it when she came home from church while she ordered the parlors and washed the breakfast dishes. If her father would only not lie abed this morning!

Her mother was downstairs before her. On her head a yellow cap of the genus called *boudoir*, clutching her forehead with its tight elastic, was a mockery of negligee. She was drinking coffee and offered Veronika some.

"No—I'm going to communion."

"You'd better have something to eat."

"You know I can't eat, that you have to go to communion fasting."

"Heathen idolatry," said her mother, and that benediction Veronika carried with her on her way to church.

It was crowded at this early hour. She braced herself for a supreme effort of mental control, to hold the singleness of her mind on God, to be soon present on the altar. Not so easy. People pressed into the pew beside her, a woman coughed throatily and incessantly, the priest scolded in his instruction, coins jingled in the collection basket. It was hard. She took her place in the line of communicants, moving toward the altar, now kneeling while the ones at the altar were given the sacrament, now up again, a little conscious of physical absurdity in the poses of these men and women who took attitudes of children awkwardly, attitudes remembered from their first communion instruction, fingertips touching each other, hands bowed.

The altar rail. In her hands she clasped the starched stiffness of the cloth which she with the others spread beneath her chin. The priest was coming towards her. She moved her mind in one mighty gesture towards things unseen that must be believed, had to be credible. She sought for awe and for fear, for the complete subjection and isolation of herself before an infinite that was definite in manifestation. Her belief came—made her limp and faint and sorrowful. God was with her.

2

At the church door was Saul. He shocked her out of exaltation. Like the morning he was bereft of magic, a long, young man, whose eyes protruded a little and were hollowed beneath from lack of sleep. Veronika was jealous of him because for him the magic of last night was apparently not gone. He had for her the same ready

smile, with the same love resting in it. She paid him the tribute of acknowledging that, even though she was vaguely irritated at being confronted with something which she could not return.

The Sunday morning was unkempt, a half-gray day that brought out ugliness everywhere, accented the lack of beauty in the clothes and the faces of people around them, made Valhalla look what it was, a grouping of small houses without plan or design, set out as if every one had squatted at once and each erected a square shelter that rose to a peak in the front of its roof.

Veronika wanted to get rid of Saul. She knew he could not help her. This was the kind of day which she recognized perfectly as one which would have to be tramped through alone and would be redolent of difficulty. All she could do was to get through it and figure up at the end of the day to see how much harm it had been able to do her.

"I have a plan," he said, and pressed her arm a little.

"A plan?"

"I'm going to get a Ford. Did you know I could drive a Ford? And we'll go miles out in the country, and I'll wrap you up warm and take care of you all day. I'm not going to let you do a thing. I'll bring everything. You are to do nothing but let me care for you, all day."

He had planned it in the night, a day of delight, weighted with the delicious presence of his love and his care for her. Because she had looked tired last night, because he knew she was not happy at home. It was a thing so like Saul—a thing that had a way of wriggling through to Veronika's pity, which she could not bear to have touched, so at its mercy was she. Yet the thing

itself did not tempt her. A gray day, the barren country, a rattling Ford. She didn't want it—nor Saul, until he could rouse magic again.

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't, Saul. I have all kinds of things to do. My brother's coming up from the U. They will all want me at home. Sunday's my heavily domestic day, you know."

His face lengthened almost ludicrously.

"Couldn't you leave them—for once?"

"Not to-day. It would be nicer later anyway, when the spring is really here."

"You liked my plan?"

"Oh, yes," she lied, gently and unavoidably.

"And I must leave you now for a whole day. A whole, empty day that we might spend together."

Why did he assume that she wanted to be with him every minute? That even if she had wanted, she would go? Why did he stand there, looking so blank, so absurd? She wouldn't have absurdity in a lover. She pulled away.

"You find another girl and take her to the country," she answered lightly, and her remark sounded cheap and raw. She did not care.

He flinched, but that was all.

"You're tired and want to be alone."

"Yes."

He left her as simply as he had appeared, and Veronika felt cheated and worsted. He had stolen the feeling that had come so hardly in the church and left her nothing except the certainty of having treated him badly. The day seemed hours old when she arrived back home, but it was only ten o'clock.

Dishes, beds, temporary order, and then her father's

breakfast, filling the house with the fat smell of bacon. Veronika concentrated on completion and was through with that at last. Her father, Sunday-shaven, went downtown for a shine and some papers, and she was free. The windows flew up and the smell of the bacon went outdoors. She laid a fresh fire in the back parlor and pulled all the window shades halfway down. In that light the pieces of old furniture weren't so bad. There were always ways to make things livable. Pulling chairs to better and more friendly angles, cutting some sprigs of the English ivy to make a centerpiece for the dining-room table, laying out books that gave some distinction to the temper of the people who lived in the house. All this was not done alone for Tom, but for her own daily visitor, self-respect.

She poured fresh strawberries, smelling like spring, on the kitchen table.

"You're not going to put those lovely berries into ice-cream," scolded Mrs. Pearse.

"I am," said Ronny coldly, "and if I'm interfered with you'll get dinner alone for Tom. And I don't want that living room touched."

"We'll see who's mistress here," was the response, inevitable and angry. But Veronika knew when she could safely domineer. She always had. The same battering futility—on, on, on, for years and years until it was second nature, like twisting your hair in a certain way as you put it up.

Strawberry mousse was a delightful task—one of the things that made her feel that she approached the way other people lived. She had cut the recipe out of a paper and tried it and amazingly it had worked. Rich, rich, cream (when she was a child the cream in the pitchers

was always thin and bluish, and Veronika bought and paid for this) and mashed, beautifully fragrant strawberries, egg beaten to white foam and then the packing with ice, the knowledge that when you again took the cover off the can it would be rich and ripe and half solid. As she worked she thought of Saul and became more gentle toward him. It was a lovely excursion he had planned. Not that she quite wanted excursions to be so simple as that. Lily would say that there was no point in jolting along, like a farmer's daughter, in a Ford. Lily was growing more and more resolute in her push toward fine things of the flesh and they were given her willingly because while her flesh was so lovely she looked like the spirit. Lily was lovely. Veronika never doubted it for a minute.

She had ordered a leg of lamb when she knew Tom was coming, and that was roasting now, and potatoes were bubbling in their kettle, and the asparagus—aristocrat of vegetables, thought Lily—was neatly tied in bunches. The day was brightening. A streak of sun showed now and then. Upstairs Veronika made the shabby bedrooms scrupulously neat. Tom would be home any minute. Like her mother she was beginning to anticipate his coming, to forget that it would probably end in a quarrel.

At a front window she stopped and stared. A long-bodied sedan stood in front of the opening in the barberry hedge. Two men were getting out. Tom—another man whom she did not know. And a girl, a funny looking girl. Why would Tom do such things? Bringing these people home. And who on earth are they? Surely not relatives—that nice looking man and that gay looking girl.

She rushed to her mother's door admonishing in a fierce whisper—

"They're here—do you understand? Tom—and a man and a girl. Be careful how you look and don't put on that bright pink powder. Make your room decent."

Tom was collegiate, punctilious and immaculate of costume in all the prescribed ways. His hair had a university cut. His tie was from the "toggerly shop" and diagonally striped, his shoes ran to a slanting peak—custom-made shoes that always cost too much. Veronika heard his laugh at the door, a laugh that was still uncontrolled, a boy's laugh sharing secrets with his friends.

"Well, where's everybody?" He met and kissed Veronika, while she looked beyond him at his guests hanging in the doorway.

"Now, guess," he said.

"Guess?"

His voice was high and extravagantly, deliberately gay.

"Who's this?" He brought the girl forward. At closer range she was still unpleasant to Veronika, as she had been in that brief glance from the window. She wore sport clothes and a cheapish short fur coat over them, with an effect of luxury and elegance that meant nothing to another girl. Her hair had been short, for she was now trying to twist a few strayed locks back into the new neck twist that was the moment's convention. She looked at Veronika with practiced eyes, eyes that pretended to droop and looked up appraisingly as they did so.

Catastrophe clutched at Veronika. She did not know why she was so miserably apprehensive.

"My bride!" said Tom, and they all three, the two

men and the girl giggled. Tom struck an attitude and hummed the wedding march.

"Tom!" cried Veronika, "Tom!"

Across Tom's levity crossed an upper glance of defiance.

"This is Peggy."

Veronika held out a hand to the girl. Not for worlds would she have kissed her. And Peggy, seeing the joke fail with her sister-in-law, bridled and minced a little and smiled slyly up at Tom as she took Veronika's hand.

"And this is Joe Prescott, my erstwhile best man." Prescott came forward from the door. He did not grin like the girl and Tom, but looked slightly shamefaced.

"Where are the folks?" asked Tom. Veronika guessed that her mother was listening at the top of the stairs.

"Mother's upstairs," she answered. "You can take your wife up to my room."

Tom flourished his arm around his wife protectingly.

"Drop those things there, Prescott, and make yourself at home, while I wash Peggy's face. Ronny's stunned. If she faints, bring her to."

His attempted lightness was hopeless. Veronika's face struck across the situation like something the existence of which they had forgotten. Peggy let Tom help her up the stairs and Veronika heard her deliberately audible whimper, "I know she doesn't love me, Tommy."

"It's a surprise," said Veronika helplessly to Mr. Prescott. "You see I'm rather swept off my feet."

"We should have let you know," he apologized; "it was really rotten of us to blow in like this. But Peggy wanted to keep it a secret."

"But—when—?"

He hedged. "Oh, they've just been married. She's

really a nice girl. Awfully popular with all the men. Crazy about Tom, you know."

"Is she a university girl?"

"First year. Just a kid—a nice kid."

The longer I just stand here, the more often he'll say that, thought Veronika.

"Won't you put those wraps down and come in and sit down, Mr. Prescott? That's the living room in there."

In the living room they both sat, facing each other again. Veronika felt preposterously stiff and as if it was a pity she couldn't giggle or do something to put this unhappy young man at ease. She asked him about his long drive.

They heard Peggy and Tom come down the stairs noisily with Mrs. Pearse. Mrs. Pearse was protesting and yet excitedly pleased. She liked tricks. This was a practical joke and she appreciated such things. Her anger would appear later.

With her wraps off Peggy was not even pretty. She was an ordinary campus type, small, yet full hipped already. Veronika guessed that her charm lay in the mastery of a female technique which could handle young men of college age. She had seen too many such girls in her High School classes not to place Peggy immediately. She thought of Lily and how outraged Lily would be. Lily was more than ordinarily impatient of cheap girls.

Mrs. Pearse and her daughter-in-law met with a kind of mutual pertness that was characteristic of them both. They talked, Mrs. Pearse with a "well, young lady, I don't know what to think, I'm sure" phrase recurrent, Peggy with a hand in Tom's. Tom was affectionate.

His affection sickened Veronika. She watched him pawing the little bunch of tawdry flesh that he had allied himself to, on which he had hung his name, watched his utter, fatuous satisfaction in it and knew that he had abandoned the grandiose plans of a year ago when he had been full of ambitions for personal achievement.

"All Peggy and I want, for the time, is a little bungalow—a love nest, eh, Peggy. We don't need much." That was the temper of it.

Veronika excused herself and left the room. As she passed the buffet mirror in the dining-room she looked at herself. She was white and ugly—nothing but pain and scorn written in her face.

Yet it was only Veronika who seemed to care much. Mrs. Pearse was swelled by excitements during the rest of that day. Dr. Pearse, his philosophy based on physiology, was disconcerted but calm enough, a prey also to the blandishments of Peggy. Veronika watched Tom as he in his turn regarded Peggy playing up to her father.

Veronika was the only blight.

She cooked and served the dinner. It seemed inexcusably messy, though she had planned it to be otherwise. Tom kept leaning towards Peggy who sat beside him. They all made certain pretensions on account of Prescott, who, Tom told Veronika in the kitchen, was one of the big men at the University.

"He's a prince, Ronny. You want to make things nice for him. I know this was a surprise, but after all it's my business. A man has to marry as he chooses. I know that naturally you'll be critical of your sister-in-law. That's the woman of it."

At last Veronika giggled.

"But you needn't be so damned superior. If she's

good enough for me and would have been for Prescott if she would have had him—and he is rich and could buy and sell this whole family like an ice-cream cone—she's good enough for you."

"Are you happy, Tom?"

"Don't I look it?" He paraded his absurd look of satisfaction, and Veronika knew that he didn't know what he was talking about.

She let it go. The dinner was over at last and Tom and Prescott and Peggy sat on the porch with Dr. Pearse while Ronny washed dishes. Her mother bustled about, eager for comment, but Ronny was dumb.

"Not very pretty, is she? I don't see what Tom had to do that for. Maybe they'll live here, he says."

"And I'm to be slavey for the crowd?" broke out Veronika fiercely. The grease was washing up against her wrists. She hated the thought of that girl sitting on the porch ogling three men while she washed dishes.

"Oh, well, we'll have to keep them for a little." Such surprising compliance in her mother. But she usually was that way with Tom.

"Then I board somewhere else. That's all. I'll leave you to your fights. You'd be a sweet household. You and Tom and Tom's charming wife."

"They'll hear you."

"That nice Mr. Prescott is going to take us for a ride in his big car." Mrs. Pearse shot off at another tangent. "He's a pretty fellow. Why don't you be nice to some one like that instead of that skinny architect? Some one with money?" Veronika tried to refuse the ride, but they wouldn't let her. They bundled her up on the front seat with Prescott as if that were her bribe to be pleasant. Peggy was going to sit with "Father and Mother Pearse."

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"That won't last long," thought Ronny. "That sweetness will wear off in a day or two."

She would not talk much to Prescott. She answered his questions. She felt that Prescott thought the only apology in the situation was due to her. Probably he thought Peggy good enough for the shabby house, the incoherent mother, the down-at-the-heel doctor or for Tom. Tom and he were intimate, but Veronika knew college intimacies. Mushroom things that were lopped off when one returned to normal family living. Excrescences on affection. She had had a number of them herself.

Prescott was impressed by her college. He knew girls she had known there.

They drove through a half dozen mining towns, all only apologies for villages and stopped at a traveling men's hotel for ice-cream. Ronny did not want any and again spoiled the party. She and Prescott stayed in the car while the others went inside the hotel.

He glanced at her curiously.

"This business wasn't my fault," he said suddenly.

"I thought you approved of it."

"Well—I don't think it's any terrible disaster. She's all right!"

Veronika looked at him and he flushed.

"Well, Tom likes her," he said defensively.

"And he says you did."

"She has a way with men," he chuckled, "has your father going now."

"A permanent way?"

He was serious. "I hope so—for Tom's sake. Tom's a great boy."

"But you didn't think enough of him to keep him out of this."

"It's too bad that you take it so hard," he evaded. "Of course I'm willing to admit that it wasn't the ideal way to do things. You people should have been notified and all that. But—"

"After all you aren't Tom's nurse. There's no use rowing with you over it," she said discouragedly. "But it's hard. It's hard to see a wretched marriage start, a marriage that is bound to be wretched."

"Oh, look here, you can't tell about that. Those soft little girls make the best wives often. And Tom's got stuff in him."

She turned her head away from him, shaking it a little. All her rage melted into pity of the situation, pity and knowledge of its cruelty. She saw spread before her like a panorama all the weaknesses, all the charm pent up in the Pearse family, weakness and charm operating alike for its destruction. Inevitably it slipped into calamity, and not calamity that dignified, not disaster but petty ruin, embarrassment and futility. She mourned for her blood with that mounting sense of responsibility for it which would never leave her, never give her rest or peace. Always she had that haunting desire that they would be distinguished, would never do things that were cheap or mean. And always, always they slipped into third rate actions. She had little sense of pride before this young man who had seen this most flagrant of displays of their failure.

He seemed to feel very sorry for her as well as ashamed of himself for thrusting himself on her as part of this tawdry scheme for fun and excitement. But then Veronika could hardly have been a factor that he would have reckoned upon. Veronika was unexpected.

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"You must have a rotten impression of me." The words came out of him uneasily.

"Oh, as I say, you can't be Tom's nurse."

"If Tom had given me any idea—I had the idea you were all a happy-go-lucky sort of family."

"Happy-go-lucky," she quoted him, grimly.

He returned stubbornly to his optimism.

"Peggy's young. You could show her lots of things."

"Peggy's formed, I know. I've been teaching High School girls, Mr. Prescott."

"You don't look old enough."

She laughed a little wildly.

"Oh, don't start to compliment me, please. Not on the edge of this."

The melancholy procession of Pearses, senior and junior, filed out of the hotel. Mrs. Pearse, senior, seemed to have just licked her lips. Her daughter-in-law walked close to her husband, looking around her at the dreary town with the superiority of the city bred who has no others around her of a higher city level. Veronika she seemed to discount. Veronika was only a teacher.

It was evening when they got back to the Pearse house. Prescott was to start back that night. It was a stunt—all night driving to reach the University by noon the next day. The half concealed plans of the trio had to come out in the open. Tom, it appeared, could get his degree if he went back. The girl did not mean to return. There was no place for her. Tom again took Veronika aside.

"Peggy lived with an aunt who raised an awful row when she heard of this. She won't have Peggy there. Can't you keep her here and be decently nice to her for a few weeks? The University is out in three weeks."

"How long have you been married?"

"Two months."

Veronika averted her face. Possible reasons why the girl could not stay on at the college occurred sickeningly to her.

"I'm earning my living, Tom."

"All the more reason why Peggy could help here. She could help around and be a companion to you. Then we'd get a place of our own when I get out of school."

"Have you forgotten what this place is like? That only last summer you said you never were coming back. You know, don't you, what will break out in twenty-four hours? Fights and blasphemy."

He scowled.

"Well, Peggy'll take her chance. She knows something about it. She was unhappy at home too. Anyway, I tell you there's nothing else I can do just now, Ronny, except give up the degree. And that would be awkward because, as a matter of fact, I have the whole Class Day exercises in my hands. See?"

She saw. She saw how ridiculously young he was, how he was sending home his young wife like a package, to be left until called for.

There was nothing else to do. When they went back into the living-room, Dr. Pearse was saying largely:

"Your business, young man, is to get your degree. We'll take care of the young wife for you."

And Mrs. Pearse said, "Well, it seems to me it's I who should be saying that. It'll be me who'll have the work in this big house."

Prescott pretended absorption in a three weeks' old *Literary Digest*. The room was warm by the open fire and prettily lighted by the silk shades that Veronika had bought for the electroliers. Melodrama had gone. Ter-

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ror was not there. They seemed just an ordinary, middle-class, bickering family. The telephone rang noisily.

"For you, Ronny."

It was Saul. She had forgotten that there was Saul in the background. Saul was saying:

"I wanted to say good night. I've had a beautiful day doing nothing but thinking of you. And I made a sketch of your head. But it wasn't good enough, so I threw it in the waste-basket. Did my thoughts keep you happy all day? Was it nice with your brother?"

She murmured some reply. It did not matter. He only wanted to keep on talking to her himself.

"Your voice sounds far. Going to go to bed early and get rested?"

The petty protectiveness jarred on her. If he wanted to take care of her why didn't he get her out of this?

"I'm busy," she answered.

"All right, sweetheart. Good night."

As she hung up the receiver she was conscious again that she had been needlessly brusque.

"Who's your friend?" asked Tom jocosely.

"You don't know him."

"A lean, skinny fellow who comes around making goo-goo eyes all the time," said Mrs. Pearse.

Prescott looked across at Veronika. She flushed silently with anger, not with embarrassment, sitting where the firelight intermittently lighted her face, only a profile to every one. The profile did something to Prescott, as it had done to other people. Its remoteness, its delicacy hurt and tempted. Peggy's softness was florid.

"I'm going to get the car ready, Tom. You're coming?" he asked.

"Yes."

"It seems so awful, Tom," said his wife. But she did not sound heart-broken. She sounded as if she wanted to excite him. What must she have come from, thought Veronika, to find this strange house a refuge, to be even willing to stay here?

They all were embarrassed by the parting. The Pearse front doorstep, so well used to altercation, was not accustomed to embraces that reeked of passion and desire. When it was over and the car had vanished around the corner, Peggy came in the house, looking melancholy and proud of her desirability. Veronika ignored her, left her to her mother and busied herself with preparations that must be made for breakfast.

To-morrow would bring Walter Pater and English classes, girls and boys who must somehow be taught what was beautiful prose. Her first class was at nine-thirty.

Upstairs Veronika's mother and Peggy were taking possession of Tom's old room. The room had been hastily made habitable by moving much of Veronika's furniture into it—her two cushioned wicker chairs and her ivory-colored floor lamp. Veronika knew it was going on—the excuse would be that it was for to-night, to make a good impression on Tom's wife. Good impression. She hated the words. They were the covering up or the pretense at covering up what the Pearses should have possessed, things which made their own good impression without being egged on, urged on. The bluff people always were making to each other. Young Prescott had been worried lest he had not made a good impression on her in this scant marriage. Veronika thought of him and Tom going back to the University, driving

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along in the sweet cold spring night and talking of Peggy and how simple girls made good wives, and in the absence of responsibilities that pressed them or made them cross, making plans for vast futures which nobly included the welfare of every one. She knew that they would talk, as they imagined, deeply. That was the way these young fellows did. They couldn't help it.

Saul did it. To-morrow he would be at her again. She was sick of caresses. They were, she felt, forever cheapened by the sight of Peggy and her brother.

The day repeated itself to her tired vision. She had tried hard, meant so well to herself and especially to God. This was what she had got for it.

CHAPTER VIII

I

IT had been long since there was a guest at the Pearse house. That in itself was novelty at first. It was an innovation that made the old house unreal and unlike itself. The weeks moved on a badly woven pattern of school, of Lily's letter in response to the news of Tom, of Peggy's prying eyes and maddening, ignorant superiority because she was a married woman and Veronika a teacher. It seemed to Veronika that her sister-in-law reeked of sex. She had packages of old letters from men that she kept reading over. She got a sprawling daily letter from Tom and sometimes left it in a conspicuous place, where its heavily inked phrases of affection struck Veronika like the vulgarity of their caressing. Yet Veronika tried to be kind. She tried to take what her father insisted was the commonplace view of things.

"You can't expect people to be like you, Ronny. You mustn't be intolerant. She's a nice girl and if she makes Tom happy none of us has a word to say. That's all. As a matter of fact, I suppose we haven't anything to say in any case."

Veronika would level her prejudices and try to meet her sister-in-law squarely and pleasantly. But there was nothing they could say to one another. They had no kinship.

Peggy met Saul and did her best to find in him a substitute for the men she knew at college, but he failed her deplorably. She commented on his lack of style,

on the fact that he didn't bring Veronika presents. It was no use. In her quick way she felt the eyes of Veronika disapprovingly on her, old maid eyes. Veronika was twenty-two and Peggy eighteen. And Veronika kept on feeling soiled by the whole business.

School during those late spring months was more of a solace than she would have believed possible, in spite of the tedium of sitting as preceptress in assembly, in spite of the almost constant failure of her pupils to join her in any enthusiasm for books. There came compensations. A classroom on a May afternoon, white lilacs on her desk, the sun coming softly across the room as it came always so warmly and so softly and the stir of response in her students to "An Apology for Idlers." She tried to grasp and hold the moment for all of them, a moment distantly related to the hours in vaulted corridors of old universities that she dreamed of, where fine thought drifted along with the living of gentle people. The sun caught in the hair of a student in the front row—beautiful like the lilacs.

There was Saul, less irritant since he was her only escape from home and the always imminent friction, worse since Tom's wife had been there. Saul's love was easy like the spring days. It became a habit, a mild drug that checked pain. She was aware vaguely that he was looked on askance by the other teachers, his constant presence at the school waiting for her sometimes embarrassed her, but she was both busy and lethargic and did not notice too much.

She had let the case of the boy and the girl whom she had discovered breaking the rules at the dance go with a reprimand. After her day of Peggy she had not felt able to proceed far with the matter. Her interviews

with the girl and boy were short and sharp. The boy had been insolent in manner at first, then as he discovered that she did not intend to go far into the matter he had become almost familiar. His remark puzzled her at the end.

"All right," he said. "Bygones is bygones."

She was used to being something of a social pariah, so that she did not notice the first evidences that the teachers talked of her. Saul heard it first, some remarks drifting his way about "school buildings being fine places on spring nights." When he found out that they had been observed, he and Veronika, coming out of the school at that early morning hour—that the boy Elmer had seen them and talked of them, Saul became passionately anxious to shield Veronika from any difficulty that might result. He was eager to carry Veronika off before the lot of them, to marry her against her will if need be. But Veronika, though she had never been as kind to him, was evasive.

The gossip came to her in an ugly way. She had been reading her class poetry, trying to make them see "Endymion" in the spring setting. And later, in the cloakroom, she came upon two girls talking.

"I get awful sick of that sloppy stuff Miss Pearse reads, don't you?"

"Oh, well, she's like that, you know. She's soft as mush. She and that architect were here one night till two o'clock. Keats! I'll say so!"

All the shudders, all the defenses in the world could not wash it from her mind. She could not even scorn it. She was wounded, somewhere internally, in the very heart of that dignity and self-honor which she liked better than anything on earth. Soft as mush!

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There were only two more weeks of the school session. Veronika wanted to run away from them and was checked as usual by necessity. She must have her month's pay. She needed the money to pay bills that would be forthcoming, for the new metal-topped kitchen table and cabinet, for the new fur-bordered cape that she had already worn. She had to stay. But she was curt with Saul. He must not meet her. He must not touch her. And it drove Saul into a kind of delirium of fear and of longing for her. He left letters at her house. He sent her foolish and charming flowers, some that he was naïve enough to gather, to the immense laughter of Peggy. So finally they had it out.

"What do we care what they say, darling? Is it that?"

"So you knew too?"

Saul nodded.

"And you let me keep on seeing you! Oh, it isn't that I care for their opinion, but it ranks me with them. Do you know what they call me? Soft! Like my brother's wife. Soft like a High School girl discovered in an escapade." Her voice broke cruelly. "And is it any different?"

"For God's sake, don't you know it is, Veronika? Don't you know what we have?"

"What have we then?"

"Love."

She seemed to push it from her physically.

Peggy crept into her room one night when Veronika was trying in vain to sleep. She stood at the window looking down at the moonlit yard and voiced her discontents and loneliness. Veronika was a poor confidante, but Peggy had to have some one.

"Maybe you people who don't get married are the wise ones," she reflected.

"You've hardly tried being married," Veronika said resentfully.

"Oh, well, I guess it's all pretty much alike. Except for getting duller. Tom does give me an awful kick though. I hate to think of his being down there alone now while here I am—dumped."

"Why did you get into it all then?"

The bride cast a superior glance at Veronika.

"There are things that get you," she said succinctly, "and then of course in a way it is worth it—keeps you nervous of course—" She began to make revelations, but only began. Veronika was sitting up staring at her.

"Go out of my room," she stammered. "I don't like that sort of talk, do you understand? I hate it!"

Peggy was bewildered. She thought she had reached a high point of friendliness.

"Don't be such an old maid," she said. "What's the use? Loosen up."

"Don't you call her an old maid," called Mrs. Pearse at the door, listening as usual.

The friendship for "Mother Pearse" had, as Veronika had prophesied, lasted only a short time. Peggy was now to her mother-in-law the "one who stole my boy from me—poor fellow." It was an immense relief to Veronika to find that she did not have to defend Peggy—that Peggy was able to fight her own battles, meeting the rages of Mrs. Pearse with rages just as primitive, hewed from the same block of ignorance and hasty anger.

"Such a bunch of nuts as you all are," muttered Peggy audibly, and two doors crashed shut behind her on her way to her own room, one in the very face of Mrs.

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Pearse. Suddenly Veronika was sorry for Peggy, so strange and alone.

Life was a crazily cut puzzle to be put together each day for the occupation of the day and scattered every night. No more relevant or progressing did it seem. Only the rule was that the puzzle pieces had to be fitted together into each other as best you could every day and sometimes there was satisfaction in the mere act of fitting, of carrying out the rules. There were a few pretty pieces, delights, the relief of warmth and sunshine after cold harsh winter and unsparing spring days, and there was the pleasure of wearing the new fur-bordered spring cape that made Veronika so pretty. Peggy was jealous of the cape. It was that she coveted, not the napkins that Veronika insisted on hemming for her in pursuit of decency. She felt that a bride must have linens, some sort of equipment. Peggy did not care. But Veronika bought damask and hemmed its difficult crisp edges awkwardly, for she had no skill in her fingers.

2

When Stewart came she was tired and ready for him. He came on a day in early June, heralded by a letter, and with complete competence put himself and his traveling bags up at the hotel before he sought Veronika. The moment she saw him, Veronika got the savor of his well-being and its desirability. She had not seen competence in a man for some time. The male school instructors were all apparently living precarious lives, threatened by hostile boards of education and by their debts; there was Saul, who seemed to sort the incidents of life loosely through fingers of chance and personal

love; there was Tom, rakish and grandiose; her father paunchy and worn. Against such a background Stewart stood out admirably. He was well dressed and heavier than she remembered, and as he took command of those things which fell to him there was about him an air that pricked the bubbles of hysteria in Veronika's outlook on her surroundings. Teachers became only gossiping women, not fates bent on her destruction. Peggy was a flirtatious little flapper, not a female harpy. Saul a callow artistic boy; Dr. Pearse was negligible and his wife an obstacle to be surmounted. Stewart's conversation betrayed no such estimates. He was scrupulous in doing the orderly, commonplace thing and that seemed to Veronika just then to demonstrate great power of management and comprehension. Stewart gave Peggy her first Valhalla thrill by presenting her with a five-pound box of candy which sent her into waves of coquettish sallies. He discussed mines and mining with Dr. Pearse and listened to the flapping futilities of Mrs. Pearse. But his eyes stayed on Veronika as if measuring the force in her which held him in the midst of such incoherence and dinginess.

He had come on business, to be sure. He was living in New York now, in Westover only for the summer, and had fallen into the kind of business which brought men to Valhalla from the Twin Cities and Duluth, business connected with the financial power back of those holes in the red clay that yielded iron ore. Dr. Pearse grasped the young man's connection with the place instantly. Like the other members of the fringe between the miners and the owning corporations Dr. Pearse had at one time and another bought a small interest here and there, dreamt his own dreams of having luck come his

way. Just such small bits of stock as he took on had rolled into enormous snowballs of fortune for other men, but in his hands they had become worthless paper. For all that, he knew about the mines and their ownership, their relations to the fortunes of the people of Valhalla. He had to know about them just as the doctor in a farming country comes to know about crops and cattle. It was the hinterland which was responsible for the economic life of his patients as well as productive of their particular physical ills.

Into the academic turmoil of the last few weeks of school came the sense of men—Stewart and Saul, each one vivifying the other, their thought and their attentions like a stimulating drug which had become habitual to Veronika. The magic that is the power of knowing that she was desired, flowered in Veronika then as it does in every reasonably fortunate person, making the body actually more beautiful during its bloom and the spirit exalted. With the presence and attentions of Stewart even the disintegration of the Pearse family seemed to check. They had all been under a cloud, their own cloud, for long. Nothing was orderly with them. The disorderly marriage of Tom was only another thing to aggravate the sense of never living life skillfully which had always oppressed the girls. In their shabby frame house the decent incidents of life skipped them all by, social intercourse, the friendliness of entertaining, the routine of well-conducted households, which gives up hours of the day and weeks of the month and months of the year to phases of orderly living. Veronika had never learned any current scorn of conventional living. Some commonplaces had infinite desirability because of their omission from her experience.

Saul did not know. He was offering her a highly spiritualized love while she was still dissatisfied because she was on the wrong side of the fence in living. Pride in outlawry was the last thing that would have occurred to her. There was pride in herself of course in spite of outlawry, but that was different.

Like all young people in love they knew little of what was happening to them during those mellowing early summer days. There was Saul, bewildered, declaring to Veronika by every means in his power that his love was rarer and purer than anything that could ever be offered to her by any one else, looking on Stewart and seeing a man as thickset in body as he must be in emotion. What Stewart offered must have been to Saul a labeled dish of pottage, and he could not make Veronika see that nor quite understand her, for she was not a person to go blindly after the first purse that was offered her in the name of matrimony. Her spirit had breathed too close to his for him to be deceived there. There was Veronika, with every sense acutely conscious of the little changes which Stewart's coming had made, of the bracing of her pride, seeing tangible things, such as her father's awakened interest in having the lawn decently mowed and the hedge clipped, seeing the house of clamor become less noisy, seeing the glimmer of respect in the dulled intelligence of her mother for herself as a girl properly "courted," and finding Peggy ready to take suggestions, even seeking them.

There was Stewart, busy, interested in Veronika pre-eminently and then in Valhalla, with its enormous undeveloped properties and the chance of more fortune than the place had yet given up, stirred by the richness of the barren country, shrewdly estimating. It had amused him

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that, though Valhalla was supposedly dry under its local laws, he was approached almost on arrival by a bootlegger with excellent liquor and he had been able to replenish his several flasks from time to time. And with him he carried constantly the thought of Veronika to be added to him and his fortune and to open to him doors of delight.

Some of the mental food offered to the High School English students was different because of all this. There may have been sparks which shot out from Veronika's highly charged consciousness of self and lit smaller fires elsewhere. Certainly the future of hundreds of workers was affected by the coming of Stewart Royden with the power to invoke capital. But Saul blundered in work and in diplomacy and the contracts for the new school buildings were awarded elsewhere. When it happened he was too absorbed in his other looming disaster to care very much. The notice was in both the newspapers and for the first time in two weeks Veronika telephoned him, unsolicited.

"I think it's outrageous," she said indignantly, "every one knows that that firm is a bunch of grafters."

"It doesn't matter. Nothing matters very much, Veronika, except you."

"You mustn't talk so. Isn't it just that indifference that made it possible for them to rule out your plans?"

"Does it matter then? Well, let me come and talk to you, will you? Let's go out for a walk, away from this silly, ugly town, this afternoon. Out in the country. I can't offer you a car because I'm too near broke."

"Of course I'll go. Come for me at the school at three, will you?"

Because she said that he came, not discomfited, but

exuberant, and because he was exuberant he failed with Veronika. She felt that his spirits, his concentration on her alone was consonant with inadequacy.

They went over the cement sidewalks through the little town, then on the rickety wooden sidewalks of the outskirts and then along a clay-rutted road. Veronika had on slippers which were expensive, walking shoes that were not meant for clay roads and was vaguely conscious of the damage she was doing to them and that she couldn't afford any new ones that summer.

"Do you know that this is the first time you've been nice to me in weeks?" he asked.

"I've been busy. You exaggerate."

"Veronika—you're not going to marry Royden?"

"How do I know?"

"He's not worth you. He's a good enough fellow if you want to use common Chamber of Commerce standards. But there's nothing there for you, Veronika. Please don't. Even if you won't marry me."

"But you're unfair. You know you couldn't afford to marry me."

"If you'd marry me, I could afford anything."

"That's what my brother did. Put the cart before the horse. It isn't so easy. You've got to think of bread, even if you're willing to give up the circus."

"But I do think of bread. I promise you that you'll never go hungry, if I dig in the mines." He laughed, his throaty, boyish, infectious laugh, and stopped, seizing her hands. "I'd take care of you, beloved. I'd guard you with my life, my body and my soul. I'm not a fool. I can always earn. Just because this silly job's a fluke, doesn't mean that I wouldn't earn enough to keep us going."

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She let him keep her hands. He hurt her when he talked like this. "And after a while I would do my supreme piece of architecture. Do you guess what? I'd design a house for us. Ours and beautiful. There would not be a line in it that wasn't a line of beauty. We would build it where we could when we could. We'd work on it together. The nights I've lain awake and planned our house!"

"Don't!"

"Doesn't it please you?"

She pulled her hands away from his, striking them together in troubled emphasis. "It pleases me," she cried, "but it's dreaming. You don't seem to see that I can't go with you to inhabit a dream house in a dream place. There's my mother, my father, my brother and his wife, my sister with her voice, all those things that hold and tie me. We're a messy family. We have to be set in order somehow. Dreams won't do it. We've always had dreams, Saul. I've lived on them. I began to live on them when I was old enough to see the failure around me. I'm—tired of dreams! I want to be cared for! I want to straighten things out—to live decently, with order, houses, gardens, servants, or at least the prospect of those things. I would only add your vision to my own and we'd starve together!"

"It's Royden, isn't it?"

"You say I don't understand you, but it's you who doesn't understand," she told him. For a few minutes they were bitterly silent, walking along swiftly, she a little absurd in her subconscious effort to spare her shoes and he absurd in his disregard for her. Her face drooped and, turning suddenly, he saw it. They were in the midst of the road, an awkward road, but he stopped

her and took her in his arms. Because she was truly tired and mixed she rested there.

"Sweetheart—sweetheart—I'll do anything—I'll make a fortune for you, though I hate fortunes. I'll do just as you say. Only don't go with Royden. Come with me."

She thought dully that she didn't want him to do what she said, she wanted him to decide and to say for her and to be taken. But she could not. There were tears of distress in her eyes. She knew how precious and rare his devotion should be and could not truly appreciate its value, could not find value in it for her. The sky was clouded and around them everything was ugly, sprawled fields, overrun with underbrush and scattered with black stumps, gaunt skeletons left by forest fires rising out of the woods behind them. As they stood she felt a drop of rain on her hand and thought with alarm that she had on her new silk hat, the one which matched her cape.

It was not selfishness. It was real worry. She could have no other hat for months. Her last month's salary was spent except for enough money to carry her through the summer.

"We must hurry," she said quickly. "It's going to rain."

He looked down at her from under the brim of his soft cap.

"I shall like it," he answered, "walking home through a fine, clean rain with you. But you must be sure to change your shoes when you get in and get good and warm."

She could not tell him that she was thinking that her hat might spot.

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They walked back to Valhalla, he talking of his plans. He would have to leave for Chicago, now, at once. Would she promise to marry him?

She shook her head.

"But will you wait? Don't marry Royden yet. Wait just a little until I have a chance to show you my plans for your happiness. Or don't marry any one. Keep on teaching boys and girls for a while."

"Perhaps I don't want to," she said almost sulkily.

He rebelled. "I won't go back to Chicago. I shall stay here day and night and watch you. You don't know your own mind. You must marry me. Veronika—we've felt so close—don't let's lose it."

It had begun to rain. Great splashing drops fell heavily around them and on them. He held her close as they struck the sidewalks again, close, but not close enough to protect her from the rain.

CHAPTER IX

AT the door of the apartment house where she rented a room, Lily paused and buttoned her gloves carefully before she went into the street. She lived rather far over on Fifty-first and she liked the place. It was accessible to Fifth Avenue and one came on the Avenue from a street which had dignity. The matter of emergence to Fifth Avenue was always important. Lily played her own rôle to a kaleidoscoping public. At St. Patrick's she went into the cathedral for a minute and knelt far up before the front altar, some prayer which must have been beautiful coming from her between her still parted lips. Then she was again on the front steps of the church, a lovely, beautifully dressed figure from her gray suède slippers to her hat of black straw accented by two waxen camellias.

She went very directly down the avenue. People did not seem to interest her. She had already a strong sense of shaping herself to be the center of interest to the public, and she knew well enough that two things were scarcely done simultaneously, that of being of interest to a public and being personally interested in casual people. Her aloofness was coupled with a deft presentation of herself, both attitudes in perfect harmony.

At Kurzman's windows she stopped, her goal reached, and looked at the gown in the window. It was of golden crêpe and it hung from the sloping shoulders of a mannikin with exquisite grace. Lily regarded it fondly and expertly and she looked as if she had every right to so regard it.

When she entered the shop and made her way to the section where such gowns were sold three saleswomen, bred in appraisal, stepped forward to serve her. She did not ask the price of the gold crêpe. She asked them to get it from the window—as they did—and she tried it on before a folding mirror. There was no question about it. It suited her to perfection.

She did not buy it nor did she show any embarrassment at not buying it. She had found out what she wanted to know about the dress and its cost.

From Kurzman's she went directly to the studio of her music teacher, choosing the inside, not the top, of a bus for conveyance. Lesone, the teacher, was not yet there. In the studio the accompanist was trying over songs. She looked wisely at Lily.

"Lesy's not here yet," she said, "must have met a friend."

It was obvious enough to both of them when Lesone came in, a half hour later, that he had been drinking. His cheeks were purplish and his manner surly. He made no apologies.

Lily stood up and went to work. The stubby little Italian lost his irritation as she sang. He snapped from alcoholic absorption into criticisms.

"It is good," he said, "at last."

Lily did not seem in the least surprised.

"I'm stopping my lessons," she remarked.

The little man bristled. "Stopping—why?"

"Haven't I had enough?"

"You are beginning."

She shook her head. "I don't think so, Signor Lesone. I think I know where I stand. I haven't anything big

and you know it. And I've got to get on the stage before long."

He glanced her up and down in comprehension.

"While you are so young and beautiful?"

"That's it. And while I can make a lot of money."

She touched her throat. "There's no opera here and we both know it. I don't care. I wouldn't like it anyway. Stuffy opera house dressing-rooms with a lot of others and a dozen fat old women ready to cut your throat if you don't crack on high C. There's more fun in other things."

"You want," he mocked her, "to sit in a swing of red cloth roses and kick your slippers over the footlights."

She laughed engagingly.

"Well, what else can I do? Study and study and know all about everything and then give music lessons. I'd have to go back to Valhalla to do that. Valhalla is where I come from—a horrid little mining place. I'd have to give lessons to all the miners' daughters. Why shouldn't I do something that will get the things I want, instead?"

The accompanist had gone out, casually, without even a farewell. Lesone shook his head.

"You want your limousine, your beautiful dresses, your jewels, your calf-lovers."

She looked at the stubby little man decrying her ambition, and with something of Veronika's definiteness tried to elucidate.

"Not for themselves. I want the curtain rising on me, the center of everything. I want lovely pictures of me in the magazines. I want to be admired. Why shouldn't I?"

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He tapped his cheek with pudgy fingers and meditated.

"All right—maybe you should. See Wanger then. He will coach you in the pretty tricks for twenty dollars half an hour, and if he likes you he will call up Zeismer and tell Zeismer about you, and if you do not change your mind and, especially if you do not let them make a fool of you, you will see your name in electric lights and ruin your voice singing to a lot of imbeciles who will not hear a note you sing unless the words are vulgar. You will live on Park Avenue and spend your time between rehearsals of 'Love in Rosetime' and dressmakers and photographers."

"But if it's what I want—"

"If it's what you want you will get it. You are that type of young lady. Not soft."

Yet as she smiled at him she looked both sweet and soft.

"I suppose that the reason I like to keep you is that you work so well and are so pretty. That means nothing to you, does it?"

She met his shrewd glance gracefully.

"Of course it does. It means a lot."

"Always so pretty," he almost sighed.

"Of course I am a Catholic," she said somewhat irrelevantly.

He laughed uproariously.

"You are a very wise young lady. I will write a note to Wanger for you."

When she went up the Avenue again she had the note to Wanger in her purse. But she did not attempt to see him that day. She went back to her room and removed any faint traces of disorder that clung to her. After

that she lunched at a sandwich shop, cheaply, for after all Aunt Kate's allowance was limited and her father sent her less and less. What money there was had to be used wisely. It was wisdom, she felt, to sit during the afternoon in a front seat at the Forty-third Street theater and watch Peggy Angell as she sang and danced, watch the little tricks with which she captivated her audience, watch her habits of gesture and her costuming. After that, for social experience, she went to the Ritz, where she had a late engagement for tea. The girl with whom she had made the engagement was some one she had met in Westover one summer who had kept in vague and disconnected touch with her during the last two years. There were also two men.

Marion could not afford the Ritz. Neither could Lily nor one of the men who was taking an unauthorized afternoon off from business. The other man was the one on whom they all relied. Vaguely he was engaged to Marion, that status giving him certain privileges. Actually the tale ran, as Lily had heard it, that he didn't want to marry too soon and Marion wasn't sure of what she wanted, and why should they marry anyhow "just yet" and tie themselves up while they were young? It was no affair of passion, but simply an alliance for the sake of the companionship which each afforded the other on parties.

Lily looked around her at the women who came and went and noted costumes and habits. But that did not keep her from being good company. She knew when to smile and what to say and how to dance to perfection. It was all her escorts wanted, and if she was able to get any bonus out of her presence in the place that was her own affair. At five o'clock something

clicked in her mind and she was sure that she must have the golden crêpe dress. The question now was how to pay for it. A hundred and seventy dollars did not appear like magic in her budget.

They were loath to break up the party, but Lily, it appeared, must go. The impecunious young man took her home in a taxi and she said good-by to him expeditiously and went to bathe and read her mail in that delicious independence which she loved. Mail never disturbed Lily as it did Veronika. She was too highly individualized. So she read with faint look of scorn a letter from Tom, who thought that Veronika was unsympathetic with Peggy, but that Peggy and Lily both had artistic temperaments and would be chums, and was she coming home for the summer—one of Tom's characteristic letters which always became sentimental incorrigibly. There was a note from Veronika with dry and caustic reference to Peggy, and a mention that Stewart Royden was in Westover and she didn't know whether she would marry him or not. She wrote that she supposed that Lily, having an artist's viewpoint, would think she was mad to give up such a man as Saul, whom she sketched with some accuracy. And then Veronika went on writing and writing well about life and the place that marriage had in it. It took Lily a very short time to look over these pages. She had an air of skipping. The end of the letter was a suggestion that she might come home for the summer.

Lily had already decided to do that as soon as she saw Wanger and got her affairs in order. Up in Westover old Mr. Pearse was failing, and failing miserably, in mind as well as in body. Lily did not consider Westover as a possibility for a vacation. Other places, where

she would be purely guest, meant more money than she could get together.

She laid the letters on her table and went down the hall to the bathroom and a hot bath. Soon the steam was rising pleasantly and she released herself into a dream of golden crêpe dress, and a black hat, with lace (or was lace going to be common after all). If Veronika married she would really need that dress. They would possibly let her pay for it in installments. She could wear it when she sang for Wanger the first time in the fall. On the strength of that it was worth buying.

Hamilton Bennett took her riding that night. She had allowed Hamilton Bennett to discover her one night at one of the mixed "private" hotel parties which she attended. She was holding him off because she would not let him regard her as one of the girls whom he could pick up for a month or two's flirtation and also because she meant to utilize the Bennett connection later. With him she was less sophisticated than she had been at the Ritz, more the ambitious convent girl who was striving to become a great singer. Resultingly Bennett talked of his own future and she did not have to listen, only to let the wind drive along her face and absorb the night and the sense of little fleeting villages as they sped along the Albany Post Road. They stopped at Tumble Inn for three dances, and then Lily let him pay his ten-dollar check and they went back to the city. He stopped the car once on pretense of looking at a view, but Lily leaned forward to admire it so ingenuously that he had a sudden disgust with petting and thought that all girls weren't alike after all. He kissed her good night, but with only pleasant fervor and some respect.

Lily did not dream of him. She dreamed of nothing.

Cold-creamed to exactitude she said a prayer and got into bed quickly. In the morning she wanted to see Wanger.

Lesone's letter was successful. She got by the preliminaries and Wanger saw her. He affected a great man's busy manner, preoccupation and impersonality tinged with boredom. Lily, who with the rest of the world was well informed as to the progress of his latest divorce suit, wore her pale gray clothes.

"Coaching for musical comedy, I suppose?" he remarked. "And imagining that all I have to do is to suggest a few tricks and you'll be in headlines."

Beauty was cheap in New York, especially in Wanger's world, and well Lily knew it. She did not rely on it alone. To it to-day she had added a touch of mystery and yet in her singing she tried to put vivacity which did not fit her.

"Look here, my girl," said Wanger, "there's no use in a girl who looks as much like a convent product trying to hand out any jazz. Delicacy is what you want."

The fire leapt up in her eyes. That was what she wanted—useful appraisal like that, not scales for days and days and endless days.

"Do you think I'll get there?" she asked.

"I'm no prophet—nor yet an insurance agent," he said roughly. "You have a good voice—pretty lifeless. Good for a church choir in a Middle West city just now. Great for funerals. It needs life and sentiment and—well, do you want to work?"

"Oh, yes, I'm going to work," she said.

"Whether or no?"

"Whether or no." But she deferred beautifully to him in that last statement as if his no would be impossible

and yet if it should be forthcoming it would be a great obstacle.

"All right. Now—when do we start?"

"In three months. If I can get the money."

"That's all right. I'm going to Europe anyway this summer. When I get back then, young lady. We'll see—don't fill up on ice-cream sodas all summer. And do just as Lesone taught you when you practice. He's the only teacher in New York."

Lily had found that out in her process of sorting out teachers when she came to New York nine months ago. She was almost equally sure that Wanger had what she wanted now. Each of them, Lesone and Wanger, was the best in his own line and Lily meant that the addition of them in her should make her superlative. She knew her New York and she was not a person who made mistakes easily.

Yet her knowledge of New York had come to her in a strangely short time. It was because she could classify the things and parts that did not interest her, because her taste was so perfect. She never coveted any of the cheaper luxury that was strewn around her everywhere, clever imitations of good clothes, sudden fashions. Her path had led very directly to the Ritz, the Plaza and the world of unconnected young women living alone in New York with reasonable decency and considerable enjoyment. There were girls who became deliberately bizarre, girls who went up like rockets in quick and wealthy marriages and descended as suddenly, girls who dissipated. Through them and through their companioning Lily directed her own path gravely.

There was nothing left of the impressionable country

girl or the unsophisticated convent student. No elaborated food, no extravagance of entertainment could either shock or profoundly interest her. She liked better to sift out people as she sifted out their motors, to know which were permanent acquisitions and which were not. And her gazing and learning were often subconscious. She had none of Veronika's intenseness of perception. She went along calmly and took what she needed, and the simplicity of her assumption was backed by her beauty, so it was given to her.

Of course if her grandfather did have considerable money and did leave it all to her, as every one quietly prophesied that he would, it was not unwise to be ready to use it.

CHAPTER X

I

IT seemed to Veronika, waiting for her sister's train, that railroad stations were the most dramatic and terrible places in the world. She knew every inch of the Valhalla station. Her mother had made scenes there when she went away to college. She had come back here after she had left college in that painful uprooting, and in this station sensed the fullness of her unavoidable sacrifice. Here, against the red paint of the long narrow waiting house, was the iron bench on which she had sat when she waited for Saul to leave her two weeks ago, that distraught and somehow terrible young man with a white face and frightening emotion. Twice he had almost refused to go. There was nothing that he could do if he stayed, but he seemed to want to be in Valhalla even if he sat in the hotel lobby or walked the streets, so that he could be near Veronika. Even that could not shake her into more than pity. The more eager and bitter his love became, the more response died in her as if it were smothered, the more unreal did life with him become and she fled back to the reality of even her home.

What all this love was she did not know, but she felt it sometimes comic and sometimes desperately unreasonable. It refused to take into account things like families and duties and yet when it attempted to spread itself into romance there were no wings. If he could have offered to take her away with him somewhere she might have been pulled into going. But against his desperate

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desire lay the foolish fact that he could not pay her fares, that he was preposterously poor and that escape became a matter of something that would cost under twenty dollars apiece.

But it had hurt.

"No one will ever love you like this," he had said, and secretly and sadly she guessed that he spoke the truth.

They had left it as an unresolved situation, with a doubtful outcome. She would make no promises, even about Stewart. That was only fair to Stewart, who, it must be admitted, was acting very decently and considerately, keeping in the background and making it clear that his purpose in Valhalla was to do business with the mines. He had been far more comfort to her than Saul. But at the end when Saul was about to go, when the whistle of the train was threatening to sound, a wave of aching gratitude for his love, a terrible pity for him, came over Veronika. She pulled his head down to hers as they stood in the darkness outside the railroad train and kissed him passionately.

He had almost not gone. But she had insisted that he must. And as he went he tried to smile because of her kindness and she felt her heart hurt intolerably.

That was two weeks ago. Every day these trains brought his letters, his flood of letters that never tired of saying the same thing over and over again, that found endless new ways to say it, letters written on scraps of paper, on the back of menu cards, on torn pieces of plotting paper. He seemed to find his only outlet in writing her and when she answered and mailed her letters on this very train she always felt that they said too much or too little.

She had come down alone to meet Lily. At the last

minute her father had been called on a case by one of the few faithful patients who remained to him, and her mother might or might not appear. She was storming when Veronika left home. Peggy was not yet dressed, as it was only eight o'clock in the morning, but Veronika had been up early. School was closed now and she was becoming less tired. She had opened all the windows in the house and put vases of flowers wherever she could to hide the shabbiness. She had even reclaimed one of her wicker chairs from Peggy to make her room, which was to be Lily's now, pleasanter. But she was afraid for Lily. There was a feeling that came on entering this station, and was present all the first few days after you came back from anywhere, a feeling of depression and of the irremediable ugliness of Valhalla, a sunken and horrid feeling as if you had shot down suddenly in an elevator. Veronika had that feeling always until she got used to things. So she feared that it would be even worse for Lily. Lily had had a great deal in the past years. The mention of the Plaza and Ritz, her casual account of motor trips in Pierce Arrow cars all weighed on Veronika this morning. A servantless house—her mother—and the train came in, joltingly, the branch train from Duluth, that stopped at every station and always did its best to take the edge off a transcontinental trip. An early morning train which brought people to a long day of discomfiture.

Her first impression was of Lily's dress and her beauty. Lily never wore the conventional dark blue for traveling, and she stood out among the passengers on the train as they dismounted. Her beige-colored suit of flannel fitted her perfectly and was simple and yet as distinguished as her plain, beautifully shaped hat and her slip-

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pers of tan leather. Her traveling bag was brown—a slim, elegant one which had been Bennett's single allowed present and she had allowed another man to match it in a dressing case. As she smiled at Veronika, Veronika forgot admiration for sheer affection and kissed her twice.

It was lucky that they had senses of humor.

"We can get what they call a taxi, but they are filthy dirty Fords. You'd ruin your suit. If you don't mind walking? It's too stupid, but father had to have the old bus this morning and I didn't really think its appearance would thrill you much."

"No paint on anything as usual, I suppose," said Lily blithely. "I'd much rather walk. That's a terrible train. I'd forgotten how awful it was till I got on in Duluth."

So she arrived. At the Pearse house her mother and sister-in-law put on pleasant faces for the minute.

"So you've been allowed to come back at last to your mother," said Mrs. Pearse, "from those who tried to turn you against me."

Peggy preened herself. She had dressed for Lily obviously, because she had become slovenly lately. But her effort failed under Lily's casual glance and the contrast of Lily's clothes, which were better than Peggy's and quite as fashionable.

Lily did not suffer as Veronika had been afraid that she might. She did not mind the appearance of the house, the plaster weighted by cracks and the faded wall-paper and all the other things that gave Veronika such acute worry and disgust. She had a sleep and began to practice. After a day or two she was a decorative presence whose ends pursued themselves calmly even in that confused household. There was no wish in Lily to better

it. She laughed at Veronika making porch cushions and insisting on salad forks. And when there was a quarrel she got out of the worst of its violence somehow. There were many quarrels after Tom came home. There were subdued quarrels in the bedroom which the young husband and wife shared. There were revivals of the old corridor quarrels when Mrs. Pearse wandered from room to room, excited by vague sensing of slights and injustices done to her. But though the irritation of the situations remained, the horror had gone out of them, at least for Tom and Lily. They knew that they were adult and could escape. With Veronika, who never had that sense of escape as definite, except when her dreams became very rarefied, things were harder.

Yet in one way she was the center of the household, being the center of unfulfilled romance. Stewart remained in Valhalla and came to see Veronika nearly every night. His restraints were disappearing now, subtly changing into impatience. He knew that they all wanted Veronika to marry him and he was growing tired of the incessant presences of the Pearses perhaps, for he grew more pressing, more insistent in his own substitute for romantic ardor.

"Why won't you marry me, Veronika?"

The question was losing meaning for her. It was only something she had to find the answer to, like an arithmetic problem, and she put off doing it.

"Why won't you stop asking me and leave things alone?"

"Because we ought to be married. It's ridiculous for me to leave you here when you'd be better off with me."

"Is it a social conscience?" she mocked.

He put his arm over her shoulders as they sat in the

porch swing that creaked on rusty iron chains. She was growing accustomed to that, between him and Saul. Almost she had come to need caresses and demonstration. She was more graceful about them now, in a manner which seemed to distress Stewart and make him suffer. Between his presence and the drug of Saul's letters she swam in a mist of being loved all the time. But she was reluctant to go further with it except indeed that things might be settled and she done with this tiresomeness of discussion, discussion, argument and question. Beyond all that must lie a different kind of happiness based on order of mind and life. And she knew that she was very, very tired of battling.

"You know it's not conscience," he told her with his lips close on hers. "I want you whether I will or not. It's beyond me, Veronika. I'm—helpless."

"And yet if I wouldn't, you'd marry some one else."

He groaned.

"Veronika, darling, it's no use. I can't play the desperate romantic lover. I can't say that I'd undoubtedly kill myself if you refuse to marry me. I wouldn't. I'd keep on being a man and myself. But that doesn't change this."

That was Stewart. He was gentled by his desire, but not stupefied, and perversely Veronika resented it. She wanted in him the tremendous ardors of Saul as well as his own competence in handling himself. She wanted him swept away and restored. She wanted everything and dimly she guessed that it was impossible to have it.

"We waste time," said Stewart, "with all this arguing. We should have been married and away together months ago."

Veronika shivered and he asked her with faint exultation:

"Are you afraid, dear?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything."

They heard Dr. Pearse crunch along the narrow driveway, come up on the porch and seat himself in one of the wicker chairs.

"Good evening, Royden. Fine night. On this sort of night Valhalla becomes actual paradise."

Somehow they all gathered. Tom and Peggy came back from somewhere, doubtless a motion picture. Peggy was saying:

"I think, Dr. Pearse, that Tom ought to get to work. I tell him that there's no harm in doing any kind of work. Why shouldn't he go into business in Minneapolis? There's lots of work if you want to do it. He's so high and mighty."

Peggy was no longer lover. She was woman, wanting to be supported and fed well and housed well and using the power which she still had over Tom to get her way. Even as her sharp little voice gave directions she was working herself closer to him on the steps. Lily and Veronika hated her way of doing it.

"He's tired, poor boy," said Mrs. Pearse. "Too young to be married—all worn out with worry."

"Do shut up," answered Tom. "I can look out for myself."

They were growing to have fewer and fewer restraints in front of Stewart. Veronika felt sorry for him, lighting a cigarette and keeping out of it. He was better than any of them. He would take her out of this and help them.

She got up out of the swing and took the few steps

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that made her the center of the little group on the porch. The moon, coming through gaps in the old woodbine, fell on her face and its strange, detached resolution.

"Stewart is going to marry me," she said.

So she put her betrothal, and it seemed in those minutes as if he and not she were taking all initiative. In the flutter that followed she remained silent. Tom was jocular. Dr. Pearse tried to put his arm around Veronika and she avoided it.

"Well," said Mrs. Pearse, "and who's consulted me? Am I her mother?"

But they paid no attention to that. Some one went off to the drug store and bought ginger ale and they drank that in awkward honor of the occasion. Stewart had turned white and silent—then he met the two Pearse men in their congratulations and Lily came downstairs and sat beside Veronika, and whispered to her, "You're right. It's fine. I'm glad."

"And am I expected to get up a big wedding?" queried her mother.

"There'll be no big wedding," said Veronika.

"Jump over the broomstick like we did," suggested Tom.

Veronika turned to him.

"No," she said, "my wedding will be different from yours."

2

It was different. In a shabby, inadequate way it carried out every convention. There were clothes to be bought and for those Dr. Pearse surprisingly produced five hundred dollars, borrowed, they knew, on some in-

surance, but in those days of excitement it did not seem to matter. Lily helped to get the clothes. They pored over catalogues from Marshall Field's and even from Franklin Simon's. They studied hints of fall fashions. Lily wanted Veronika to have two beautiful outfits of lingerie which she said Veronika could "get along with," but Veronika did not want to get along with two sets. She wanted six and she had her way, though they were not of the fine georgette that Lily wanted, trimmed with lace, but sheer white things of handkerchief linen made by a Valhalla woman who knew how to embroider delicate monograms. All her life Veronika had wanted six sets of fine-spun lingerie. She used to handle them in their tissue-papered drawer when they came home as if they were indeed a dream's fulfillment.

They were the key to the trousseau.

And she must be married a Catholic, though they were all ludicrously unfamiliar with what a Catholic wedding involved. She must sanctify this venture. Veronika saw a priest in the vicarage, a young priest who often read the Mass she attended. He was full of formulæ. She must have the young man come to see him and he would be instructed in the way of Catholicism. The priest argued slightly with Veronika because she was not marrying a Catholic. But that could not be helped and he ultimately recognized it. He spoke to her gravely and with fine diffidence about what marriage must mean to a Catholic woman. The accent of his thought was on the children of the union. Veronika listened in respectful dreaminess. It was not quite clear to her what he was talking about, and the children of whom he spoke were so remote that she did not even feel embarrassed. And it did not occur to the priest that she did not fully

grasp his admonitions nor to Veronika that the generalizations were extremely practical in their application.

Children, thought Veronika—yes, some time I shall have children. But she still wondered how children came about. One could know so much and yet have such gaps in the knowledge. Marriage was a strange unfulfilled sacrament. In her contemplation of it, the warnings and disciplines of the priest passed by unargued, unchallenged, not even comprehended.

But though she loved to think of her marriage as a sacrament, she felt none the less the lack of place and distinction of her quasi-religious wedding. The Pearses were not Catholic—she herself a stray parishioner, a kind of anomaly, powerless to express the fervor which the thought of God upon the altar could excite and reconcile it in the priest's eyes with the fact that she belonged to no young ladies' sodality. Her religion was too close, too personal, too intense, too unrelated to externalism for the rites of the church to help her at a time like this. She discovered indeed that there were no rites for a Catholic who married a Protestant. The two people slipped under the fence of excommunication, but they were not encouraged in doing so. There was no ceremony, only the few rather cold words said in the priest's house in the presence of witnesses, the papers which dealt largely with those remote children who were to be brought up Catholics.

But before that were the other arrangements. It was August, so that there were few of the people whom Valhalla considered important remaining in the hot little city. Most of these Veronika, by virtue of her father's long residence, could have properly asked to come to her nuptials, but they were not at hand and she was not sorry.

Stewart's family, the Roydens, did not come. His mother wrote Veronika pleasantly with possibly some faint accent on the fact that Stewart had made his own choice and she wished the young couple all happiness. His sisters did not write. Their cards came enclosed in the family gift, a chest of silver that made Veronika draw her breath in sharply with delight.

It was amazing to her that possession pleased her so much. These acquired things filled her with a sense of well-being, of protection, of stepping over the line that all her life had made a pariah of her. Presents drifted in. One or two of her college classmates heard of the event and made her gifts. From Westover the convent nuns sent her a present of an embroidered tablecloth, and Aunt Kate, apprised by Lily of Veronika's needs, helped fill out the trousseau. There was nothing from Michael of course. Since Michael had left Westover and gone to practice law in Albany less and less had been heard from him or indeed of him. The thought of Michael still aroused apprehension in Veronika. But she did not think of him often now. She was the center, the hub of the universe, and it was a time of plenty according to her meager standards.

Stewart let her see her power over him more and more now. He was completely orthodox. This was the time when he should be subject to Veronika and he was so—so much indeed that the aspects of Stewart as a husband hardly presented themselves to her for most of the day. There were phases of the business ahead of her that Veronika did not so much avoid as overlay. But she was conscious of occasional and surprising solicitude from her mother and of Peggy's sensuous thoughts following her about. Sometimes she used to stop and won-

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der if she knew enough to go on. There were gaps in her mind which she could not bear to let any one fill. Occasionally the glamour of possession lapsed and she stared flatly at the fact that in return for what she was getting she would have to be Stewart's wife and whatever that involved, of which she was not well-informed. But that could be overlaid again with a fresh layer of activity and the quick challenge that the thing was not yet upon her. Anything might happen yet—her constant companion of luck and superstition was at her side until indeed the night before.

The frame house was full of activity and even blandness. Upstairs Veronika's proud new wardrobe trunk stood open, its flowered cretonne inside lining brightening the hallway. In Lily's room hung Veronika's new clothes, immaculate on their hangers. Downstairs in the front parlor were ranged the gifts that had come, the chest of silver and its subordinate offerings. Veronika herself had been absorbed in making the best of the rooms with flowers and shaded lights and was now in the kitchen, where she was stirring mayonnaise for the salad to be served to-morrow at lunch. They were to be married in the morning and, after a lunch with the few guests, to leave Valhalla.

The kitchen windows were up, the evening wind came in through muslin curtains of Veronika's making. She heard a woman talking to Lily in the parlor—neighbors and old friends, who had not been in close touch with them for years, were surprisingly nice about this wedding, possibly because of the rumors of Stewart's wealth. The mayonnaise thickened and whitened to perfection. Homesick peace invaded Veronika. She felt that she could hardly bear this going away. This was her scene

of struggle and dream. This was hers, the habitat of her life, and she was forsaking it. She went to the window and looked out on the circle of aged fir trees just as she had used to when she was a child. She knew what was happening to her. She was stepping from one cycle of life to another and she could never step back. In place of the old, cruel, but almost endeared responsibilities there was coming an unknown life, one of which she knew nothing. For a chest of silver, a five hundred dollars' worth of new clothes, for the yielding to a man's insistence, she was leaving all this—her youth, her independence, herself that was herself. And Saul was suffering hideously. He had written. He had wired. He had begged her. Saul was passing out of her life now like all the rest of her turbulent youth and she did not want him to go. She did not want to trade her precious disturbances even for new peace. But the moment of barter was almost there.

On the driveway she heard the rush of Stewart's car and the sound of his voice—his and Tom's as they got out together and crunched down the graveled path. The whole fatuous world was going on with its plans for her disposal. Veronika switched out the light quickly and rushed to the door. She didn't want to be there when they came in. She didn't want to talk to Stewart. She didn't want to see Stewart. In a second she was out of the back door and slipped along in the shadow of the fir trees, bound somewhere—she did not know—out of her destiny, if she could escape.

She was only in the shadow of the old hedge when she heard some one speak to her.

"Who is it?" she asked almost breathlessly, as if this flight through a back yard were in truth dramatic escape.

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Saul's low throaty voice, all the laugh gone out of it, answered her:

"It's only me, Veronika. Don't let me frighten you."

"But where did you come from?"

"It doesn't matter. I came to see you. I wanted to see you and I was afraid you wouldn't let me so I hung around the house."

She stood staring at him, only a tall dark presence in the black night, and then felt his hands on her shoulders.

"I wanted to see you," he said passionately, "to see if you're happy or just a fool. I can't bear to have it. I know you love me. It's not that other fellow. Oh, Veronika, Veronika!"

He was almost sobbing. All the stress of the weeks he had gone through burst on Veronika with intolerable pain. She forgot everything, even Stewart, in trying to comfort him for a minute. And she almost held him in her arms.

"You do care for me," he pressed.

"Of course I care," she answered softly, "of course. But I'm not worth this to you, Saul. I wrote you that I've promised."

"What does a promise matter if you've promised to wreck your life! Besides it is not too late to break it. Listen, Veronika. I have a plan. You wanted a plan all ready and I have it. I have money. I borrowed it. I have a hundred dollars. Come back with me to-night—come away with me now and to-morrow they could never part us again." His voice grew thick and desperate. "Come, please, darling. Let me save you from this."

Against the planned orderliness of to-morrow, against the church in the morning, the wedding luncheon, the packed trousseau, the venture out of disorder into order—

liness, Saul's plan struck like a jagged flash of lightning, beautiful and destructive. It roused in Veronika a sudden desire to go with him, to try what she could do for him. There was little response in her to either of these men who had so pressed her to the deadening of response that it was almost a clear setting of plan against plan, of order against disorder, of that which was natural to the Pearses, strangeness and queerness and erratic action—and Saul—against regularized living, the things she had lacked all her life. But in her hesitation Saul swept her into his arms. Never had he seemed to be so tall, so strong, so eager for her, and all the vague fear of men's love that had been lurking in her for days rose again to the surface of her mind. She let him hold her close, but her very limpness told him that he was losing ground and as he tried to make her respond to the ardor that was in him he felt himself failing, for he released her.

"You will come, won't you, darling?"

Even in the darkness he knew that she shook her head.

"Does he love you as I do?"

"I suppose not. But does it matter?"

"You'll find out that it matters," he said brutally.

"Veronika—before it's too late?"

"I can't. I'm promised."

The life went out of his voice.

"Then you want me to go?"

"I want you all to go," she cried. "I want to be left alone. I want you to stop harassing me. I don't know whether I'm going to get married or not. But I want you to go—go—and stop bothering me. Leave me alone, I tell you. Leave me alone!" She was like a fury. It was impossible to touch her. And it may have been

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that her inclusion of Stewart in her reaction encouraged Saul. But he hated to go. It was only her clenched hands, her tenseness that made him feel that he had better take her at her word.

"Remember that I love you."

She did not answer that.

"Can I see you to-morrow?"

"No," she said flatly, "if I marry it's because I want to. If I don't marry him I won't marry you. Now go—"

He went. His quiver was empty at last. But before he went he kissed her and she felt his love swim through her—and out again—

"I won't come again unless you send for me."

Stewart found her, half an hour later, sitting on the grassed bank beside a sidewalk half a block from her home.

"Want to be alone, dear?" he asked. "Isn't it damp there?"

Of course he knew that something was wrong with her, but qualms on the brink of marriage were natural enough. Stewart would not object to them, she thought sardonically.

"I don't know," she said. "I'll come in after a while."

He too left her, and the minutes passed while she thought of all that she had embarked upon, and then as the time stretched out she grew immensely weary of sitting thinking and got stiffly to her feet and went home, through the back door, up to her room, which she locked. Every one knew that something was wrong with her. She could guess that the whole house teemed now with plans not to excite her or disturb her and that this astonishing group of people were in league to soothe her and

that things had indeed reached a strange and magnificent pitch of importance when Mrs. Pearse could be subdued by events. She contemplated her importance and listened vaguely to the talk below stairs and then turned off her light and lay staring out of the window for a long while, wondering where Saul was and if she had been wrong and thinking largely of the absurdity of the entire arrangement of marriage that kept nagging at you until you gave in to it. She thought of the chest of silver and at first it was important and a looming obstacle. If she didn't marry Stewart that silver would have to be shipped back. It seemed a pity. Then the silver was only silver, tools with which people ate and no longer important at all in relation to the disposition of life.

It might be just as well to have it over with. Perhaps even after you did marry you could preserve fragments of yourself, tuck them away. Could she preserve them better with Saul than with Stewart? Were they worth preserving? She rocked herself to sleep with philosophical thought.

3

In the morning every one was still tentative and somewhat furtive in their glances at her. She was up early. The ceremony had not been altered and was to take place at eleven unless she did something dramatic and unexpected. She flirted with that thought.

"What would you all do if I refused to marry Stewart after all?" she asked Lily.

"Well, you picked him. I don't see why you need make a fool of yourself at the last moment."

Peggy said, "It's scary at the last minute," and

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Veronika froze her friendliness with a look, but when her father came up and put his hand on her shoulder with a patting that was as near as he ever came to caress and said, "Good girl—steady, now, Ronny," she felt that she was about to cry and had to take instant refuge in telling her mother that she didn't think she'd get married that day.

"Well, I don't see why any woman does," said Mrs. Pearse. "It's the men that have all the fun—making women slaves, that's all." The remark was directed at her husband, who went out of the room quickly with a worried glance at Veronika.

The florist's boy came. An immense corsage for each girl, but Veronika's was of orchids and of lilies of the valley—sumptuous.

"They must have sent those from Duluth—that's worth about fifty dollars," said Lily, appraising it.

And Saul had had a hundred dollars—incongruous and disturbing thought. Poor Saul—the pathos of his inadequate hundred dollars. One should defend it somehow.

"I am going up to have a bath," announced Veronika.

"Why bother, if the nuptials are off?" laughed Lily.

Veronika found herself laughing too.

"One can always use a bath," she said, and went off in its direction.

It was after all a mechanism which could only be stopped with over-great effort. One can get out of marriage, thought Veronika. She recalled that Catholics should not look on marriage like that. Marriage was a sacrament. So the priest had reiterated. They were all on their way to the sacrament shortly, for the first family sharing of one. Stewart's car—her father's washed-up

shabby one—the neighbors' cars—parked outside the priest's house.

The priest's living-room was ugly. Pictures on the wall attracted the eye direly—sacred subjects that were fearsome—pierced hearts—tragic faces of holy saints. There was a leather rocking-chair that creaked, and Mrs. Pearse sat in that, little jerks of her body, as if in resistance to the atmosphere of clerical holiness, bringing out the hidden squeaks. Veronika was dressed in her suit of soft blue *crêpe*, bordered with summer fur, and did not feel natural, so completely well-dressed. Lily wore gold *crêpe*, that had been not so long ago in Kurzman's window. Peggy was outstaring every one in rose color and there were a few others, a teacher or two whom Veronika liked, a few old neighbors, Ellie Lewis in a white organdie—the room filled.

With astonishing lack of ceremony, Stewart appeared, looking hot. He was apprehensive of Veronika also. She knew that she was worrying every one and kept her pose of mystery, talking little and keeping her eyes on distance.

Behind the priest were tiger lilies, quantities of them. Lily had collected them from the gardens of friends and sent them over and they were banded in a great ugly green vase. They should have been pretty.

Father O'Rourke began. His tone seemed to reproach these two whom he must have under his wing when they were so unfamiliar with what his wing involved. He was immensely sober. The words were chill. A civil ceremony performed by a priest was all it amounted to, a heartless affair, indulged in because of one of Veronika's necessities.

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The priest asked if she "took this man" and at the moment it never occurred to her to hesitate. She was anxious to make things less stultified and said that she would—rather hurriedly, almost eagerly. So it was over and they signed their names to some more papers and in a book and people began to kiss her for no apparent reason. Stewart apparently had such an impulse and she drew away, but no one minded that, for after all the thing was over and they were married. The priest smiled at them finally and was dignifiedly hearty in hoping that their wedded life would bring them happiness and the grace of God.

In a little gust of gayety they all went back from the church to the Pearse house for lunch, and Veronika wanted to help get lunch and for once was not permitted, though Lily gave her a droll look as if appreciating the humor of this sudden elevation of Veronika above manual labor.

The day was growing hotter and hotter. The dining-room shades did their best to keep out the sun. The whole business was hot and tawdry and not at all important according to Veronika's shift of mind. She was very anxious to either get in the kitchen or out in the hammock and instead had to sit in the parlor with Stewart beside her, both of them in discomfort carrying out some one's idea. Marriage—that they made such a fuss about—was nothing at all.

THE SECOND BOOK

THE SECOND BOOK

CHAPTER I

YET days had merged into nights and nights slipped back into days through only a brief cycle before it seemed to Veronika that nothing but marriage had ever happened to her and that nothing else was of consequence in the world. In her hands she held the key to the universe and in her mind light had been flooded on dozens of obscurities and wonderments. Nothing was as she had thought it would be, and yet everything was so actual that clearly it could be devised in no other fashion.

Stewart was astonishingly real. He had been suppliant so long that she had come to think of him as at the disposal of her mood. The feeling of personal power which had grown in her during these months of courtship by Saul and Stewart was still with her, deepened, sharpened, explained. Yet it was personal power which knowledge made timorous sometimes and sometimes apologetic and sometimes marvelously swept by generosity.

It was melancholy and it was sweet. The reasons for everything were prey to the languor which kept drifting over her and which Stewart encouraged. He wanted her mind cloudless and her body relaxed, and though at first her mind tugged on at those responsibilities left behind in Valhalla it was with an increasingly faint tug. She could not even remember exactly what Stewart had seemed to her before her marriage. He had waxed in importance now, yet not so much as Stewart as in the

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rôle of husband which seemed to her a very mighty and splendid part to play. Formerly she had thought of marriage with the slight sense of controversy which pervaded her generation. The controversy was very remote now. She was tasting with her emotions and not with her mind.

Wedding trips were altogether holy. She shuddered away from the vulgarization of them in popular thought and comment. It seemed so necessary, so reasonable that a man and a woman should depart together and find intimacy silently and secretly, in the anonymity of railroad trains flying through darkness, in the soft luxury of strange hotels and inns. She liked the trains best. Isolation in the midst of unnamed and unknown companionship as they sped along through darkness or through strange places kept romance steadily aflame, and the proportions of adventure large as Veronika must have them to be satisfied. Those first weeks of marriage did much to slake her thirst for the dignities of living. In Valhalla there had been the eternal necessary pretenses that she might not fall short of the respect she demanded of herself. But in this new life were outward symbols of inward grace. Ease and the first soft, quieting touches of luxury were there. She savored these things not in the least greedily, but deeply and almost solemnly, as if she was bringing herself homage.

Languor—and Stewart striding in and out of its period of suspension, bracing it. She lived through that first month in exquisite simplicity of mind and Stewart worshiped her after his first fear, worshiped her generousities and the diffident latent sweetness that rose to the surface of her actions. They felt that they had discovered the world, which was as it should have been.

Veronika was very beautiful. She instinctively discovered the beauty of line and gesture, and offered it to her husband. She was relaxed, not struggling against the slight sadness which enveloped her now and then, as it did even Stewart. He always returned to exuberance, but now and then she saw the ache hidden deep in his eyes as he looked at her and knew that it was because he too was finding that he had been given only finite moments, finite motions to express an infinite desire. And sometimes when he would look closely at her he would place his hand over her eyes as if he could not quite bear the revelation of whatever depth of relationship he saw there. Such simple things—a white arm stretched along a pillow—to set the balance of the universe. And in the day one could rest brooding over the wonder of night that could so exalt and change the spirit, and make the body so mystical a wonder.

So Veronika found what human love was and expanded in its rare beauty, and felt very princess-like and fine as she walked down the soft thick padded corridors of hotels or sat opposite Stewart in luxurious dining-rooms and tried on her new negligees and had joy in keeping her trunk in perfect order and vaguely scented. Stewart was to the rest of the world a nice looking young fellow enough, but to Veronika he was unique in being her link of connection with so much that was hidden in a dark sweet world that ran under the surface of food and drink and living. It was delicious to think of that current of love flowing under the lives of all these people whom she met and saw, to feel that at last she knew why things were as they were, why men sought women and poets wrote verses. Once in a while she plucked her mind resolutely away from things which intruded in it—

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the question of her mother and father (they must have been lovers at some inconceivably remote time), the fact of the barter and sale of relations between men and women. Such unpleasant thoughts could not be quite barred, for Veronika could not bring naïveté to her marriage though she brought it beauty. But the intrusions were transient. She was in a fine high mood which lent dignity and color to everything and a marvel of power to herself.

Their wedding trip, which was extended, included Westover and held a promise of Europe, though that was still to be decided by Stewart's vague "business interests." Westover came first. There Veronika found everything changed and shrunken after two weeks of hotel living, of meeting Stewart's friends here and there and her own college friends. In so short a time certain pompousnesses of living had become available to her and she had taken on their color so that the house of her grandfather was a flat-faced wooden building, large and ugly. The seams in the old cherry in the dining-room had split—had they been split for years?—and madras curtains hung without beauty or grace at the windows. The old man still sat by the table in the back parlor, definably older, pinched by rheumatism, clinging to his life-line into immortality.

At the Army Post thin-faced young officers dawdled about, a new group who looked for the most part extremely callow, and the garrison itself was made up of colored soldiers. But the worst part was Michael's house. On the parlor floor the Brussels rug was worn to its cords and on the walls were pictures of the more lurid conceptions of religious doctrines. With Michael gone

one noticed these things. Looking back, Veronika supposed that he had never cared whether they were there or not. Worse—Aloysius was shrunk in spirit. He sat at a dining-room window all day long and waited for death, like old Mr. Pearse, but not so fittingly. Death's approach had nagged his spirit thin. He had not been able to hold to that gallant and humorous view of his hump and his life. Veronika found him praying and reading inconsequent religious books brought in by simple-minded relatives. She was sickened and sickened again by her own distress. For if reason ran straight and religion was indeed divine she should think it eminently proper to find Aloysius with his beads on the arm of his chair and his discarded book—"Little Jewels of Thought on the Life to Come." But for Aloysius!

It was hard to ask him about Michael. She guessed at Michael's decline.

Michael was living in Albany and practicing law. A glimmer of the old irony came into Aloysius' eyes.

"The blonde got fat," he said. "I think Mick must hate her. She was here with him once. No love lost—no love lost—"

"Does he have to stick to that?" cried Veronika rebelliously.

"Doesn't he?"

"It's hideous."

"Few things are perfect," said Aloysius sententiously.

"That's a lazy way to lie down under trouble. Why doesn't he make a fresh start?"

"Mick? Well, I guess he's a bit fat, too. The blonde stripped him of romance, Ronny, and he's conscious of that."

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Veronika shuddered.

"You are living in romance now, Ronny," Aloysius went on.

"In reality."

"In glamour." The book slipped from the arm of Aloysius' chair and Veronika let it lie, a sprawling bundle of sentiment. "In glamour," repeated the cripple, "and you'll have to come to reality just like the rest of us. Reality—humps—blondes getting fat—plots in graveyards waiting for you under a Celtic cross—a vale of tears, Veronika, that's what they say, tears and slop, that's what it is."

She closed her eyes. The knowledge that she had only to move away from this depression to get back into her own bright circle of clean quick life, enriched by love, seemed immeasurably cruel to Aloysius. Aloysius' mother came in, carrying an eggnog on a battered silver tray. She respected Veronika immensely since Veronika had married a Royden.

They all did. All Veronika's relatives were glad that she had stepped into that higher social fold signified by the Roydens and the Royden name. The Roydens had lived in Westover for a hundred years and there was now left Mrs. Royden, strongly conscious of that hundred years and continually and tiresomely dwelling upon it. She lived in a square, stone house and her life had ceased to matter to any one, thought Veronika. Mrs. Royden, elder, was harassed by the responsibilities of her living, by the calendaring of her small responsibilities. No fusing of life into philosophy had come her way with age. She remained a bickerer with small events. The sisters, who had brought their husbands comfortable competence, and made occasional trips to New York and even

to Europe, had pleasant houses and pleasant children. When they introduced Veronika they accented her college education until Veronika felt it must be her only strong point with them. That not because it meant erudition, but it was a minor symbol of gentility and took her out of the class of the common. They were likable, but having once become familiarly Kate and Jessamine, having been attained, they too shrank like everything else in the old sleepy city. Only Stewart retained importance. Veronika listened to the endless talk of her sisters-in-law, of their good connections and their small relationships to things and events of importance. Such a one was the cousin of the secretary of the navy. There had been a dinner for her at Colonel Stout's last week. Jessamine was there. Kate, slightly lower in the social plane because her husband was a business and not a professional man, had not attended. In the sister's eyes the thing seemed immense.

What Veronika felt throughout Westover, with all the relatives and connections, with the little city itself snuggled by the river in its habitudes, was the same. It was its intense preoccupation with small events, especially its preoccupation with itself. It had come to full stop in certain satisfactions. Unlike Valhalla it was not always molding itself on cities of large scope and size. It was a source, a historical site, and was at ease, if not with smugness, at least with contentment.

All this mattered because there was much family talk of where Stewart and Veronika were to live, and Veronika knew that she did not want to live in Westover and take the second floor of the Royden house and look out on Grove Park, with its aged elms, for long periods of her life. Stewart until his marriage had been

living intermittently in Westover and New York, but his New York residence was only a hotel room.

Another thing that seemed to shrink on close approach was the Royden fortune. There was money, to be sure—a grand lot in the eyes of old Westover, which had always considered the Royden family rich. It had been a substantial heritage for the girls when they had come of age and Stewart had had his share. The widow had her old stone house. But the Roydens counted the cost of things often, even more than Veronika had been accustomed to do. Living had changed and the fortunes made in 1890 were only competences in 1912. Stewart, she found, if he were to be the capitalist she had assumed him to be, must increase his fortune. The Valhalla interests were important and she felt an odd sense of pride in finding that out. It was not too easy to find out from her husband the limits and exactitudes of the income they would share, and she was shy about pressing the point because he had brought her greater luxury than she had ever known. He explained some phase to her and put her off with a caress or a cheque. She liked that gesture of affluence and the blindfolded way of being paid for as only those who have lacked sufficient financial protection can like it. But it often seemed to her that Stewart spent money badly, and she already had needs which she was forced to satisfy in the Westover shops, using Royden credit, opening new accounts in her new name. She kept wishing that she had enough money to send home to Lily, so that Lily could thoroughly replenish her wardrobe before she went to New York. But she did not handle much money and certain vague plans for the aid of her family's distresses or discomforts were being constantly postponed. She had found that Stewart was a little im-

patient about the bond between her and her family. Never unkind, but impatient.

"Don't bother about them, darling," he said to her one night, when he found her reading a letter from Lily with a rather downcast face, "it's just that I wanted to get you away from. I want you to let them lead their own lives and then to let you and me lead ours."

"Of course. Lily is going back to New York, she says. I think from what Aunt Kate said yesterday that she will help her. Lily's all right. It's Tom. Tom is still just hanging around."

"Tom always will hang around more or less."

Veronika looked up at her husband sharply. He was lighting a cigarette—he smoked dozens daily and the gesture was already almost too familiar. Clearly his remark was not meant to wound her. It was casual.

"It's that girl," she said. "Tom has no end of ability and personality. Every one's always been crazy about him."

"That won't help him any," said Stewart.

"Don't you like Tom?"

"Of course I do. I like him. I like Lily. But I didn't marry them, Veronika. I married you. And while we're on the point I'm glad to get you away from them. You're much more of a person—not nearly so nervous or continually distressed when you aren't listening to family troubles all the time. I'll be all the trouble you want, Ronny," he finished jocosely. She said nothing more. But her mind drifted back to Valhalla. She had not severed Valhalla after all. It was strange that her first sense of entity had come through this. She had been living in Stewart deeply, violently. She supposed that she had merged her life with his completely. Yet,

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at the challenge, she was again Veronika Pearse of Valhalla and Valhalla responsibilities were again her own.

She wrote a long letter to Lily that night and felt refreshed by it. She wrote as if she were talking about family plans and responsibilities. When Stewart, who had been out for a few hours playing bridge at the Country Club, entered the big cool high-ceilinged room which they shared in the Royden house he found her finishing her letter and watched her as she sealed it. There was a speculative look in his eyes as he looked down at her and read the address on the envelope lying beside her.

"You're up late, dear," he said.

"Is it? I hadn't noticed."

He was smoking again—contemplatively.

"I think I'll take you abroad, Ronny."

"Truly? It isn't just a plan? But it would cost too much, Stewart. Oh, I'm sure it would."

"Leave the money part to me."

"That's what's hardest."

"What is?"

"Just leaving it to you. I feel like such a useless thing."

She found it impossible to go further and tell him that while she felt the checks here and there on their expenditure, while she was continually conscious that there wasn't a lot of money, she couldn't help feeling that he was foolish about it. That if they didn't spend so much on this luxury it would be easier to ask him for the money for the next necessity. But she could not mar the delicacy of their relationship by beginning to pull in discussions of money. It made it seem as if she wasn't satisfied, or as if she wasn't fully cognizant that she was bet-

ter taken care of than she had ever been in all her life before.

"I never spent money," said Stewart, "on anything that I enjoyed as much as you." The flavor of his talk nearly always gave her pleasure, his masculinity, with its common little outcroppings, things she had always heard of as subjects for jest, the rather ordinary jokes, the somewhat banal compliments, ordinary and conventional as a man's clothes, but not changing his appearance or personality. She slid her arm along the desk toward him. That was all she had to do. That was the wonder of it. From that half-gesture of affection she could indicate that there was a world of gratitude, of love, happiness in her, and that it all came from him and went back to him. His eyes rested on her arm and they explained tenderness. Strange. With her eyes closed it was often hard to visualize him. Yet with them closed as they were now she knew that there stood beside her the person through whom she was to see life and who was giving her possibility of knowing it.

"Dear Stewart," she gave him simply, as an answer to everything.

"Don't spend all your time worrying about Valhalla, sweetest," he warned her; "there are things you can't alter. Let it all slip out of your life and just be happy with me now. That's the thing you ought to do."

Somewhere in the house a door creaked—some one, maid or mistress, went about her business leaving Veronika and Stewart to even more perfect isolation. Privacy was still delight to them. Each time any little incident like this twanged the cord of it they were alert with response.

Stewart was kneeling beside her.

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“Ronny, darling, each day it seems more impossible that I have you.”

She laid her hand on his cheek softly and let the flame burn, kindling itself against her passivity. Power was strong in her. A wave of it bore her to its crest.

CHAPTER II

I

BEYOND Queen's Hall and just off the affluence of Portland Place lay a small street, one of the London streets that seemed to Veronika to be so delightfully inconsequent, as if tucked in long ago for some now forgotten purpose. It revealed nothing of itself of course to the American travelers. They knew Cavendish Chambers and that was all, and indeed of Cavendish Chambers only that door to the right on the first floor.

It was the town flat of Edward Mavory. Mavory, just off to the war, had looked Stewart up on one of his leaves which had fortunately almost coincided with their arrival. He and Stewart had been classmates for a year in Yale. Mavory was glad, he said, to rent the flat. When he got leaves he would be in Surrey with his mother most of the time anyway and it would be an economic convenience to have the flat sublet for the two or three months the Roydens proposed to stay.

Mavory was a tall Englishman on whom Veronika made singularly little impression. He was extremely handsome, with dark hair and red cheeks, but Veronika secretly felt that there was an obvious stupidity about his looks as well as about his manner. He and Stewart talked endlessly of extremely small incidents which had marked their mutual college careers or of war probabilities. Now and then Veronika wanted to dash a remark into the stream of talk between them, but she was halted

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by feeling that it would be out of tune. She wanted to express her horror of war and yet that wasn't at all the way the men were looking at it. Her attitude came back to her from such brief flights as a complex of amateurishness and sentimentality reflected from the practical outlook of the men. So usually she held her peace when they were with Mavory and had a sense that Mavory was extremely bored with her and that he dashed off to brighter rendezvous after they had dined together or been to a theater. Once indeed Stewart went with him. He said that he would ride down with Mavory to post some of Veronika's letters and come back later.

She had heard the whir of their departing taxi and set about re-ordering her (Mavory's) living-room before she went to bed. She liked Mavory's rooms. They were not the reflection of Mavory's taste. Originally the rooms had been done by an artist who had been glad to get rid of the "lot" to Mavory at a sacrifice. The artist had the room before Mavory and he had found apparently that with the approach of war interest in art had slackened and left him poverty-ridden. He had gone—yet somehow the idea of him remained in the dull rose Chinese rug—the black lacquer tables.

Veronika straightened the rooms with her old Valhalla touch of order and sat down before the fire, the miserable but consecutive fire of an English living-room. Heavy rose tapestry curtains stirred at the long windows which opened into the tiniest of iron balconies. It was very luxurious and very still, the kind of scene that Veronika loved to savor, conscious of her part in it, conscious that this well being and luxury were hers.

She had meant to go to bed, but when an hour had passed and Stewart was not back she lost her taste for

it. She was too awake, too conscious of his absence, wondering if she should not be concerned by it.

After all, she thought, he's no child. He's an able-bodied man, and ought to be able to get back here.

The hours crept on. It was long past midnight. She was shut off from everything in Mavory's flat. Across the hall in the flat which also fronted on the first floor were people doubtless—or a person. The flats were bachelor flats and only the war had made the concession possible which allowed Veronika to live there. Upstairs the gray, stage-like gentleman, whom Veronika had seen on the stairs, might be stirring. But these people were nothing to her, who were physically closest. Servants below stairs, servants whom she knew were alternately puzzled and amused at her Americanisms. Somewhere, outside in the vastness of London, was Stewart, the only one among all the millions of people who found her important. He was held to her by the tie of love, of marriage. Suddenly these ties seemed slight and as it occurred to her that they were fragile, she found herself insisting upon them violently, as important, as hers by right, as indestructible.

Why did Stewart leave her alone like this?

The answer came cruelly when Stewart came in at three o'clock, piloted upstairs by a weary taxi-driver, extremely drunk.

She shrank away from his deadened attempts to greet her, to offer some blurred explanation and was only more outraged when he went to the bedroom and obviously fell instantly asleep. She could hear his heavy labored breathing through the two doors which separated them and it drove her to a fury of anger. The loneliness which an hour ago had seemed so frighteningly mysterious was

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a hundred times more hideous now, a hundred times more fearful.

Where had he been? What had he been doing?

She assaulted the heavens with her hysteria, her tantrum of grievance and pain. All her new spun knowledge of men, all her fine woven garment of their relations was dragged in mud. Stewart was sleeping off his debauch. This was what she might expect, she thought. This was what men did to women, chained them and then left them on the chain while they ran away. Men did as they pleased. They had their own good time—

She was standing before the mantel, her eyes glaring angrily into those coals which had invited reflection only three hours ago. A sudden motion of her arm, a gesture of rage and there was the tinkle of glass on the hearth. A high-ball glass left on the mantel had fallen and broken. The sound woke in her an unforgettable memory, a memory of glass breaking on the back stairs in Valhalla in shattered fragments. She turned to look in the mirror, irresistibly. There was her mother looking out of her eyes, her mother's anger, her mother's rages, her mother's fury against men. The likeness struck Veronika like a blow. She sat down in the nearest chair, shrinking, sobbing.

In the next room Stewart snored. If she could have gone to him and talked it out it would have been easy. In her ignorance she tried that. She opened the bedroom door and switched on the softest light.

"Stewart," she said softly.

She could not wake him. When he responded at last it was to hold out his arm for her—a gesture of love, accompanied by a sleep-fuddled "darling."

Yet somehow, warned by that likeness which had spoken to her in the mirror, warned that there were worse things than she had sounded, Veronika managed to lie down in her own bed and pull off the light. Darkness snuffed out the tiny drama. The amazing lesson to Veronika was that she slept.

2

When she awakened it was to a sensation that things were wrong, which instantly beclouded her first clearness. She waited for a moment for events to come back to her, but it was rather the mood that came back. This, the familiar Valhalla awakening, the wakening after battle, had traced her across the ocean and found her here in London in a strange room with thick gray mist sifting through the open windows. She rose and pushed them down, then stood looking at Stewart, still asleep. The horror was gone this morning, only the ache remained that there had been horror. She was sorry for Stewart, even as she puzzled. What did she know about men—except that they were driven? Poor Stewart—who had been good to her, who had been her lover and had given her the best of all the things she had ever had? It was against or perhaps beyond reason that she found herself kneeling beside him, his head against her hand. This time he wakened and struggled back through his own paths of memory. This time his endearment was more than sub-conscious.

But of course it wasn't the end of it. The generosity of her acceptance of him was not perfect as it should have been to have carried before it the suspicion, the

tracks of disloyalty, the question and, most of all, the fear of an unknown thing repeating itself.

She was beginning to discover what every married woman must discover, that the commonplaces of marriage exist because they are truly commonplace and inevitably occurrent. She kept trying to keep away from little trodden paths of married habit, but it was not so easy, even in London, even though she had put thousands of miles between her and familiar things that might be expected to wear quickly into grooves.

Gradually from becoming a mist, Stewart's business was taking on definite outlines. She knew now what he was about. There was a steel company in New York which was interested in Stewart's Valhalla ore holdings. Stewart had ideas about finding a market for the steel abroad and of taking a small part of the capital stock in the steel company himself.

Out of this plan was to come food and raiment and shelter and provision for the future. Veronika wondered often how they could exist so easily, with such leisured hours.

"But you surely ought to get started, Stewart. It's ten o'clock," she would say, with the sure instinct of the woman sending forth the breadwinner.

"Nothing starts in London before noon," he would laugh, and finish his cigar amid a welter of newspapers. There would be an interlude of affection. Sometimes Stewart found it hard to leave his wife even for a little while, and, as far as Veronika could discover, his reluctance or ease had nothing to do with her mood or any phase of her. It was in Stewart himself that the source of his moods lay.

She had found, too, that he had rich days and poor

days, and that was confusing. There was the day on which he wanted her to buy a platinum wrist watch in Bond Street and she had to drag him away on a plea of further reflection. That was succeeded only the next week by the day on which he worried about the price they were paying for Mavory's apartment. Subtly that sense of complete moneyed well-being which had wrapped itself around Veronika during the early days of her marriage began to disintegrate. It wasn't that she spent any less money. She spent a great deal. But the freedom to spend it, the sense of being untrammelled was not there.

The late autumn came—a different autumn from any she had ever known. There had been the early chills of Valhalla, the omnipresent sense of furnaces, the stripping of trees by chill, professional winds—there had been the mellow, reddening falls in Westover, laden with a damp, sweet sense of ripening fruit. Here in London the sense of season came through the calendar and through the more frequent dampness and steadiness of mist.

Veronika had too little to do. She was aware of war, but it was an alien war, and one borne with easy optimism by all the British whom she met, still in their first flush of surety. It was—scenic. Scenic in the music halls where chorus girl beauties were dressed in the costumes of the Allied nations and the orchestras played the national airs of the Allies (and no one was perfectly sure which tune was which until they came to the Marseillaise and God Save the King). A pictorial war so far with a sense of something salacious running through it—these stories of rapes and ravages, of Belgian outrages. Veronika tried to help refugees with Belgian relief work. An enthusiastic Englishwoman led her into it, one whom she had met through a business connection of Stewart's.

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It was discouraging to find that the English did not like the Belgians, and that all there was to do in fact was a kind of badly organized Associated Charity work supported on her part at least by no loftiness of patriotism.

The truest things that came out of the war came incidentally. She was walking along Piccadilly one day when a regiment of young soldiers passed her, fresh no doubt, to judge from their rosy faces, their boyishness, their spick and span uniforms, from some model training camp in England. Soldiers of no experience. Later that same morning she met some others and the contrast bewildered her. These later ones were brown-skinned—they slouched as they walked—their file was irregular—their clothes had no air of newness.

“Who are they?” she asked a woman standing beside her, “soldiers?”

“It’s a regiment back from India on the way to the front, Miss—”

These soldiers of India, walking, not strutting, these veterans told Veronika more by their weather-beaten look than she could ever have guessed of the reality of long continued war, of the fact of it when the comic opera phase, the martial song noise, the civilian accompaniment was knocked out of it. She did not forget them, nor the boys in their soldier suits who would come to look like these campaigners.

Of course the weeks were punctuated by high dramatic moments. The Germans approaching, driven back, the occupation of a new town, the information that things had reached a climax followed by the story that all information given out in England was rubbish. Submarines, airplanes—a death list still glorious and not beginning to be nationally sickening—all pictorial.

Along with it ran the very definite knowledge that out of this state of affairs Stewart had hopes of making money for himself and for her.

It was like a story she was reading on her wedding trip, something very interesting, but which at another time might have been more interesting. Because the thing that sucked everything else into its own surface like blotting paper was living with Stewart.

She would have liked to swim in isolation, but she discovered something about that, too. Stewart wanted her to himself violently, but not continuously. There were times when he wanted to show her off, when he was definitely anxious for company. Veronika had never doubted in her dreams that when she had opportunities to wear beautiful clothes and meet people of distinction she would be thoroughly equal to the occasions which came. At that point the dreams always were suffused in success. Now when these chances and occasions came she was not always successful. As with Mavory, she did not always attract people. Even as she began to get again the old habits of money responsibility, so again she began to have the feeling of social failure that came over her at the old Post dances in Westover when she looked at the graces of Mary Tracy. There were graceful women here too and now there was Stewart for whom she especially wanted to match them.

They went to a house party in Hants, at the house of a man with whom Stewart had some business relations. It was delightful for the first afternoon. Like all Americans Veronika delighted in the sense of being in the midst of an English novel. It was a large house with many rooms, with gardens about it still not quite devoid of bloom (she exulted in the thought and sight of gar-

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dens in a plural, remembering the sweet-pea trellis and the nasturtium and geranium plots of Valhalla). In the room which she shared with her husband there was a fur rug, snowy white, beside the great bed, and the coverlet was of rose satin.

"Just to be in a place like this does things to you, doesn't it? It makes you more important for always," said Veronika, standing at the window and looking out at the early November sunset.

Stewart, who was most lover-like that day and had adored her all the way in the train, answered fittingly—

"As you are the only important thing in the world anyhow—" and took her in his arms.

It was sweet and confident to dress. She wore brown velvet for dinner and a pair of bronze slippers. It was a costume which always became her and she was so sure of that that it sustained her until they were half through dinner. Then her mind began to drift. At first she had liked watching these men and women enjoying themselves together. The man beside her, a thickening middle-aged man, asking her something about America's entrance into the war. She made some statement, true enough, ungallant, definitely pacifist. There came a kind of hush and she realized it was not what she ought to have said. But she could not flex. She felt again the young, rather gauche girl, "putting her foot into it." The moment passed, but the man beside her was bored. That was clear. He gave her no more opportunities. She tried to talk to him brightly. Suddenly she became aware that a woman across the table was regarding her with amusement. Mrs. Roper was the woman's name. She was a woman with a beautiful neck and arms which somehow one thought of instantly. Veronika tried to manage a

look of hauteur and suspected that she only showed crossness. She looked at Stewart, but Stewart was talking to his own partner, one of the golden-looking English-women who looked well in the evening. Every one except Veronika seemed to her to be already heady with wine. She had very great ignorance of and suspicions of wines. The tradition that "Hot Stuff," a few drops of brandy in hot water, taken as a stimulant, was the only moral drink clung, an indestructible Valhalla tradition. But she saw these other women seem to soften in the regard of the men, to take on a subtle lusciousness that left her gauche and angular. The woman to whom Stewart was talking was the wife of an officer at the front. It was not right, thought Veronika with a virtue sprung from a source which she did not stop to analyze, for a woman to amuse herself so gayly with another man while her husband was lying suffering in a trench.

Squabs were served. She hated squabs, all small birds that you had to carve yourself. They were too small to be reasonable. She tried to be deft, in mortal fear that the bird would slip from her plate on the cloth. There were so many things one had to be brought up to, she thought distressfully. Even when you are college bred and of good taste, that does not help you with squabs. Between comedy people, eating with their knives, whom you could make fun of, and epicures delicately trained was that great class of people who never had been served from the side, but always from the platter, who had difficulty in following the silent suggestions of trained servants. It didn't matter, didn't affect the real things of life, she whispered to her mind. But it did! Until manners slipped from one unconsciously, until one was bred perfectly, there was no perfection of body and soul. There

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were freckles on her forearm. The woman to whom Stewart was talking didn't have freckles.

Lily could have managed all this.

"So you don't think your president feels inclined to come in," said the man heavily.

"We all think the Allies are right, but does that justify war?" she answered.

The man wiped his mustaches easily, comfortably. A bundle of bones lay on his plate, looking different from Veronika's hacked squab. She reflected that he had eaten many a bird successfully. One could tell. Eaten squab and talked to beautiful women.

There was so much to eat and so highly flavored.

After dinner it was very little better. When she was through correcting impressions the women had of spaces and customs of the United States, the men were with them again. Stewart was having such a good time. Why couldn't she help him by having one herself? Another man tried to talk to her, a middle-aged officer, lean and immaculately uniformed. At first he seemed to like her better than her red-faced partner. Perhaps brown-skinned, undeveloped young married women pleased him. She tried—so that Stewart might see—to prove attractiveness.

"I was in the States a couple of years ago."

"You were? Did you like us?" She made an attempt at archness. The sudden coquetry sat badly on her, did not fit somehow. Dismally she felt utter lack of the quality which attracted and held men. For she was keen and as the man gave her flat platitudes she felt her failure quickly.

They played bridge and some of the people went out doors. It was the sort of scene she had always wanted

to be a part of, the kind of scene of which she had read—French doors, bridge tables set up by servants. Some one spoke of her to Stewart as “your nice little wife.” She felt angry, aggrieved, and futilely unable to prove distinction.

And her bridge game was bad. It was clear that the lady with the yellow hair liked Stewart. He was at his best, a flavor of wine and tobacco around him that was very masculine, an ease, a lack of pretense, handsome in black and white—she had never noticed quite how well Stewart wore dinner clothes. With her mind on these things she fumbled her bridge. She wasn’t even clever.

It came to an end. She and Stewart were in their bedroom again, the room which had so delighted her. Now it did not. She wanted to get back to some place where possession was hers and she could revive her dignity and power.

“That’s an awfully nice dress, darling,” said Stewart, “but there’s something about that shoulder that isn’t quite right. It doesn’t fit well—that shoulder strap.”

She pulled away from him. He shouldn’t have his mind on shoulder straps. Wasn’t the world at war? Besides it was simply that she had never learned how to manage her under things well when she wore evening dresses.

“I see nothing wrong with it,” she said coldly. “Most of these women were like all Englishwomen, badly dressed and over-dressed. That Mrs. Ivers you concentrated on seemed to me especially so.”

Stewart grinned.

“She’s a lot of fun—”

“Fine time to be having fun, with your husband on a

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battlefield. Would you like me to carry on that way if you were fighting for your country?"

"You sound like a Fourth of July speech in Valhalla," said Stewart, lightly.

"Valhalla's all right, Stewart."

For the first time he seemed to recognize her awry temper.

"What's the trouble, dear?"

"Nothing—nothing. I just don't approve of all this riotousness when the world is at war. Do you?"

He went through that business of cigarette lighting which was to so madden her later.

"I don't know. I have always found that when people criticize the good times other people are having there's something like a basis of jealousy," he said casually.

Veronika choked. It was cruel to be as keen as that. Stewart could be keen and cruel too. She was discovering that, as the days slipped along.

"I really can't imagine being jealous of such a person, if that's what you imply, Stewart. My respect for you is rather too high to imagine you attracted by a dyed blonde."

"Woman's inhumanity to woman," said Stewart.

There rose again in his wife that blinded anger that had come on the night he was drunk, that dangerous threatening anger born of their relationship, which seemed bent on its destruction even while it insisted on the strength of the tie, that desire to talk about rights and satisfy itself with hysteria.

"You make yourself absurd carrying on like that," she said chokingly, "flirting with that common woman."

A very definite coldness charged his look at her.

"Now, Veronika," he answered, "don't be absurd. And

don't excite yourself. I don't know what is bothering you, I'm sure. Remember that you are in some one else's house and conduct yourself accordingly. We can't have any Valhalla acts here, you know."

"Don't you dare play King Cophetua to me," she stormed.

He watched her, still smoking. To Veronika for a moment he seemed perfectly strange, a cool mature man who had trapped her into dependency of relationship. She felt him master of a thousand impulses and desires in which he had no intention of including her. The structure of marriage toppled, leaned, about to crush her and all women under it. "I'll go and smoke downstairs for a while. I do hope, Veronika, that you'll try to get yourself in hand a little."

He shut the door softly and with control.

CHAPTER III

STEWART hated scenes. She knew that now. She was not to be allowed in so far as he could prevent it, the emotional relief of them and she was discovering that it was easier to sweep disagreement aside with a storm of personal emotion and anger than to take it in his rather close-mouthed way. Wakening at Winchester the next morning, wakening early, she slipped out of bed and went to her window with the familiar flat sense of personal failure. Her own anger was entirely spent. It always died in her as it rose, quickly. Now she was left with her constant duty of reconstruction upon her—to put things back in order between her and Stewart, to reassure herself that she hadn't slipped backward, that things were still going up towards her unmeasured ideal.

She thought of the people she had met last night. They shouldn't have terrorized her socially, but they had somehow. She hadn't been quite able to meet them and yet she had no slightest sense of their superiority to her. No one was ever superior to that fine Veronika whom she carried about secretly with her, the Veronika who could consort with princes if she were given opportunity. She knew who these people were. Smart, middle-class English people, rich, connected well here and there, but distantly, not completely, with the groups who dominated English life. One gathered that from their talk. This place was lovely—but it was not an estate. It had not the magnificence of the houses through whose grounds she and Stewart had occasionally motored, where there

were truly great houses inhabited by history in the past and in the making. It was that sort of thing toward which she yearned. This place was fine enough—it kept you up, like having a manicure—but it wasn't completely satisfying after all. She naïvely thought, looking down at the perfection of the autumn gardens, that she would like to meet lords and ladies. Lords and ladies—would she ever? Her discomfiture of the night before came back to disturb her—Stewart's criticism of her shoulder straps. Why was it that while she was mentally desirous of so much she never seemed able to quite make the physical grade—look the part? She liked to dream of meeting people, but when it came to actually meeting a host of shynesses and gaucheries came to thwart her. If she could only dance better, play better bridge, ride, command admiration.

She wondered how many mornings she would be awake before Stewart and regarding him like this. Suddenly she knew that their number would be legion—that each time she watched him so she would know him a little better. Closeness was a mirage of love, of marriage. One married, but did not get very close to the other person, at first. As time went on and you drew off to look, it was clearer that you never had been close.

Why had Saul wanted her? Why had Stewart wanted her? If it had been Saul with whom she had gone through these last months would she have been feeling differently this morning? Surer and more exalted? Of course she would not have been here. She tried to visualize where she would have been with Saul—in some furnished flat, no doubt. Saul would be hovering about trying to help her get breakfast. Veronika looked down at the mauve silk of her negligee—at the white fur rug be-

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side the tumbled bed, and drew her thought away from comparisons. They were unfair.

She guessed that Stewart would be somewhat cross when he awakened. He usually was, after a great deal of liquor, and there seemed to have been a great deal last night. Gathering up a bundle of clothes she went into the little dressing-room and dressed carefully. She was sure of her clothes this morning. In all the world no one could match Americans for sport clothes she thought, looking at herself in the dressing-room mirror and thoroughly approving of her beige jersey dress with its scarf of orange silk.

She went down the stairs. The hall was open, and in the drawing-room a maid, on seeing her, quickly gathered up her dustcloths and disappeared. Veronika gave her a good morning and felt delightfully in command of the situation. She stood looking around her, the vision of being mistress of a great house taking possession of her, wondering a little what she would have in her own house. How much could Stewart and she afford? What would they afford? How much money would there be? She would like to have a house in England and come to it for part of the year.

Lily would come to visit her. It was sweet to be at home in a vision, in a dream. The soaring of the spirit that always accompanied her dreams was with her again.

The door opened behind her and she turned to face one of the men whom she had talked with the night before, the brown-faced officer whom she had been conscious of disappointing. He was very vigorous and handsome in his uniform this morning.

"Good morning," he said. "Have you seen Captain Barrington?"

Barrington was the red-faced man who had been beside her at dinner.

"No, I haven't."

"I wanted to find out if he had any news."

"Has something happened?"

"Something's always happening. But that's it. Nothing does happen to poor Barrington. Each morning he has to bid an eternal farewell to his wife and it's dreadfully on his nerves."

"Why an eternal farewell?"

He seemed surprised at her ignorance.

"His company may get its orders any moment. And if they come when he isn't here—they are billeted here with Mrs. Denham—why, he doesn't come back again until he gets leave from France—if he does. They have a couple of children here—perhaps you've not seen the kids."

"But why won't they let him say good-by to his wife?"

"Just at present," said the officer, quietly, "Kitchener's idea isn't to take even wives into his confidences."

"And you all get such sudden orders?"

"Oh, not I. I'm training soldiers just now. But these companies that are ready just have to move along. Of course they all hate the waiting. It's that that wears them thin. Mrs. Barrington's nerves are suffering."

He spoke of it all easily and lightly, as if he could not refuse her the information she asked for, but wished to tell it without especial emphasis.

"It's a dreadful business," said Veronika.

"Too bad your president doesn't think so," commented the officer.

"He does—that's why he wants to keep the people he's responsible for out of it. It's not our quarrel."

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"Quite so. Not a distinguished position for America to take, but entirely safe."

"You don't understand the American point of view—or Americans."

"I've been in the States, as I told you, trying to get it."

"How long?"

"For a year. I know your New York and I spent a terrible week in Chicago. I saw Yellowstone Park and I even know your Vassar."

"That was my college."

"I knew that when I looked at you."

"Are you making fun of me or of Vassar?"

"Neither. But I had a friend whose sisters had been to Vassar. They were like you."

"How?"

"Handsome."

"That's not what you mean at all."

"It's before breakfast. And besides I really must hunt up Barrington."

He smiled at her, his eyes admiring her dress. But she knew that he really didn't like her. He didn't like Americans or Vassar. And she wondered why and meant to find out.

His name was Colonel Daggett, and at breakfast a few minutes later, with a skill of which she had not suspected herself capable, she found herself managing to sit next to him. She guessed that he knew that was purposeful, but was only amused by it, possibly tolerating her a little more because she had shown a trace of boldness. He made breakfast better than dinner had been. Yet even now she seemed unable to do more than graze the surface of things. Her hostess, a large woman who had a great

air of capability, was kindly, but obviously preoccupied. She talked volubly to Stewart of his business, which seemed to interest her immensely, but with Veronika she had that faintly admiring pleasantness which one gives to pretty children. They all were like that with Veronika. The blonde woman with whom Stewart had been engrossed the night before seemed now to be equally engrossed in Captain Barrington. Stewart, who came in later than most of the others, was casual with her.

Much of the talk was ephemeral, but possibly because of Daggett's revelations of the state of mind of the Barringtons, Veronika seemed to sense the current of thought which flowed along under the chatter. They were all absorbed in one thought—the war. Veronika wanted to be admitted to their thinking. She felt that she had things to say about the war, but even Daggett would not talk of it more with her. He refused controversy. But when she tried to press him for his reasons for classifying her with his sister's friends, he laughed at her.

"You'd hate it if I told you."

"No," she said, and looked extremely pretty, "I'd like it."

"And after all, I don't know. It's your look. As if you lived with your fingertips. Mental fingertips, too. And you always do want to argue, don't you?"

"What else?"

"That's enough."

"You don't know us very well when you judge us by our looks." She let her face relax, thinking of Valhalla—"It's not all fingertips. Up to the elbows sometimes."

Daggett looked curiously at the profile beside him. Veronika had taken on that look which was especially

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hers of a wistfulness that called for protection. The artificiality of her hard little social manner, hybrid of Valhalla and Vassar, was gone.

"Don't take me seriously," he told her quickly. "I was just trying to find an answer to your questions and I took the first one that came to hand."

She nodded without words and he felt impelled to go on, now that she was leaving him alone.

"What I felt with those sisters of my friend was that they were beautifully incomplete—or beautiful and incompleting. But they were so content to be so. They thought they were done. And the older one seemed to have stayed at the same point as the younger one, so I suspected the younger one would stay there, too, even as she got older. They don't intend to feel—like your president's attitude now."

Stewart claimed Veronika after breakfast. They were motoring over to an army training camp. Daggett watched her go with her husband with heightened interest. He knew of course that she was a bride and the thought faintly stimulated him because he had secret and romantic ideas about bridehood. He knew a great deal about men and women after forty years. Stewart he had classified and liked at once, as much as he cared to like Americans, and Veronika he had disliked after he had talked with her ten minutes. But this unexpected strain of sweetness, of something like submission in Veronika, piqued him. He didn't look for it in American women and he wondered where it would take her.

Veronika spent the day trying to make friends among the women. There were the Barrington children to be sought out, three long-legged girls of eight to twelve years, with straight light hair and composed manners,

and Mrs. Barrington who looked exactly like them, only with her hair up. Mrs. Barrington did not welcome Veronika's proffered sympathy. She acted almost as if she were prejudiced against her, and Veronika wondered how much her talk with Captain Barrington had to do with that. For his wife could be expansive. In the afternoon Veronika heard her with her hostess and caught one flying phrase—"It's not the probable agony that I mind—it's the waiting for it!"

But when Veronika talked to her later and tried to show, or at least imply, sympathy she found her words slipping on the icy coating of the other woman's reserve—and underneath the reserve she guessed that hostility flowed. The puzzling thing was they all were less hostile to Stewart than to her.

There were people for tea in the afternoon. After she had realized the somewhat bewildering fact that Mrs. Denham had no intention of introducing Veronika to each guest and that such omissions betokened no slight, Veronika withdrew to a window seat and felt rather lonely. She thought, as she always thought, of the scene as something to carry home to Valhalla with her—or at least to Westover. But she wished she had studied the war news more carefully. Stewart was at ease talking of campaigns and maneuvers with a knowledge which she had not suspected. Why, she wondered, didn't he talk to her like that?

Lionel Daggett saw her across the room as he came in and the diffidence in her manner, the slight pathos, which he had noticed in the morning was still there. Of course, he thought, as he crossed the room to her, she doesn't know anything at all. Neither informed nor experienced and yet she can feel. Probably that's what

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Royden saw in her. Probably very delightful when she's alone with him and in certain moods. Not nearly as flat and suburban as most American girls are.

"Sitting alone, and analyzing the British?"

Veronika shook her head.

"No—" She stopped there with a smile that was like the catch of a sob, and the man thought quickly, "She has charm—she is charming"—and sat down to make the most of it.

He was still making the most of it when Stewart came up to them, and he watched Veronika's reception of her husband—the sway toward him that he sensed rather than saw and that spoke of the unassuaged intimacy that lay between them. Nice fellow, Royden, thought Colonel Daggett, but how plastic the girl still is. There's something in her heredity or her past life that has betrayed that horrible satisfaction so many young married women have.

He had seen that trace of the mark of melancholy perhaps. It left him pondering Veronika. Daggett had reached an age when he was not ashamed to ponder.

"Colonel Daggett's a nice fellow?" asked Stewart, when he and his wife were alone.

"Awfully," said Veronika, "he talks so well. He said he'd come to see us in London."

"Did he?" Stewart showed no enthusiasm. He lifted her chin in possessorship.

"Well, don't waste any thought on him that belongs to me."

The spur of that faint jealousy had altered her relation to him entirely. Veronika's heart rose and fell and was saddened and excited. Last night he had been critical of her—of her gown. To-night because another man took

some notice of her he was different. Love shouldn't be like that—not a thing you had to reinvigorate.

They sat again at dinner in Mrs. Denham's beautiful dining-room, a company somewhat different from that of the night before. The house guests were the same, but there were some young officers who had motored up from the camp, and two new guests from London. Veronika was in white, a soft dress of white silk velvet that she had bought on Bond Street on one of Stewart's rich days. She sat beside Daggett and he was amused and enchanted. His engrossed deference drew the attention of the others and she found herself under stimulus becoming pleasant, witty, delightful. Even the women looked at her with less boredom, and her hostess releasing her mind for an instant from its tangle of responsibility looked down at the girl she had classified as the "stupid little American" and thought, "What a lovely face that girl has. The light in her eyes! She seems radiant. There's a certain expression—no doubt she's pregnant—"

CHAPTER IV

IT was Christmas Eve and Veronika was alone. That in itself had been inconceivable at first. It hadn't occurred to her that she could be alone. On Christmas Eve festivity had always been organized in Valhalla even if it never lived to enjoyment. Always there had been a celebration of some sort on the twenty-fourth of December, all her life. But a week ago Stewart had gone to Scotland, and she then had a touch of influenza so that he would not let her go with him and risk further chilling in the night express. Of course he had meant to be back for Christmas. His telegram yesterday said that he would be back Christmas night and sent his love. There were people he had to see and he had been detained. His letter to-day showed no realization of the enormity of leaving her alone on Christmas Eve.

All morning Veronika pretended that it was all right, that it really didn't matter whether or not one was by one's self on Christmas, and all day the deadly isolation struck further into her. No one seemed to be celebrating Christmas. On Portland Place there were no lighted trees in the windows of the great apartment houses, no candles in the windows. In the shops alone she saw some sign of recognition of the feast. She stood for quite a time before a poulterer's shop that seemed actually the gayest place, with its naked looking geese and turkeys hanging outside the door, and she found herself empty for the ugly familiarity of Valhalla. London was concentrating almost exclusively on packages for the boys in the

trenches. Presents for soldiers—presents for soldiers, conveniences, comforts, novelties that meant nothing to Veronika. She had helped at the Belgian Relief headquarters the day before—had seen to the packing of Christmas baskets of food that were to be given to the refugees housed in Hampstead. But to-day she had not gone back. She had been superfluous even yesterday, and knew it. There were three women to do the work one could do. Somewhere else she might be needed, but she did not know where to go.

And she was tired of books. She had read so many in such a short time. In the afternoon she sat in the warm luxury of a motion picture house trying to forget herself and not to let her anger rise at Stewart. Of course he had to consider his business. But Christmas Eve! Their first Christmas Eve. There should be a tree and presents, even if there were only two of them, to celebrate the feast. The picture did not help her greatly and when she was again outside she hailed a taxi and drove back to the flat again. She was standing bleakly at the long front window, looking down at the impassive street, when she saw another cab come up and an officer disappear in the doorway. To her amazement the maid came up to her with a name. It was Colonel Daggett.

It might have been her loneliness or the rose glow of the early lit lamps that made Veronika feel that she knew him very well and that he was kinder and handsomer than she had thought. She held out her hand to him in warmer welcome than he had expected. He held it for a minute, as if feeling through it the mood she was in and its needs.

“It’s a poor day to intrude on you.”

“Intrude!” she cried, “you’re simply salvation. I’m

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alone here. Stewart's in Scotland and I've been desolate."

"Then I can stay for an hour?" He seated himself in the long chair by the hearth. "Do you know why I came? I wanted to see you again and I've another reason. I wanted to talk to some one who wasn't full of war enthusiasm or war despair. Some one who was still simply a human being."

"I'm a wretched, selfish human being—lonely for my own little place on the earth—a horrible little red clay mining town where I've been unhappy all my life. Because it's Christmas. Isn't it funny?"

She laughed, and the candles on the mantel holding tottering flames showed her face clearly, with the hair brushed back and new, untainted expressions hovering around her eyes as if marriage and loneliness and love and strange countries were casting mysterious shadows instead of leaving marks, faint and alluring. She had dressed when she came in, wearing now a red dress of *crêpe de chine*, an old one that was the color of faded scarlet, and the warmth of its tone had charged her personality or appeared to have done so—

"I can tell them that you'll stay to dinner."

"It's nearly seven. Well—if you've no reason why I shouldn't!"

She spoke through the tube to the cook and Daggett watched her, noting the delight she took in the little excitement.

"But haven't you friends in London that wouldn't let you be alone when your husband's away?"

"No friends really. Acquaintances. People who for one reason or other have been hospitable. I like them all,

but their ways are strange and on Christmas it's a time for your own ways."

"For the red clay town where you were unhappy?"

She knew that he was trying to draw her out, but she had no impulse to resist. She wanted to be drawn out, to talk of Valhalla, of Lily, of Stewart. And Daggett, who had come from his sister's house, where they mourned already the loss of a son, and where emotion had taken on very grand proportions indeed, listened to these pica-yune events and troubles and watched through them the lovely readiness of Veronika's mind and emotions. He thought of his sister whom he had left, already looking gravely over her grief at the spectacle of a world plunging to ruin and already setting events in proportion, and he found relief in Veronika swelling her loneliness to tragedy and seeing all life in relation to herself, even when she walked on her stilts of generalities.

The man brought up dinner, serving it as Stewart and Veronika always had it served, a medley of American and English custom, the courses abridged somewhat, fish and savory omitted and the sweet limited to one dish to suit their American idea of dessert. The man who served looked at Daggett with that appraising look that can come through the impassivity of the well-trained servant and found him a gentleman. So he gave deft attention to the meal and when Veronika took a minute to survey the scene, she found it altogether delightful and like a play.

Daggett told her many things about the war she had not known and he did not exact from her the measure of sympathy that so many people did and which always drove her cold because they aborted the sympathy which

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needed time to develop before it could be born. And his calmness that was dispassionate made things more real. He destroyed the picture, the music hall flare, the swank, and she saw the war as it was to Daggett, of indefinite length and tragic consequences, stretching on without much hope even in victory.

"Odd," she said, "it's something the way Stewart looks at it."

"Your husband sees things very clearly. I talked with him. He has a great sense of politics for an American."

"He has a fine mind. I somehow discounted his mind when I married him," answered Veronika. "I keep running up against it now and then. Sometimes when I don't want to work things out by thinking about them, his mind is like an obstacle."

"But he thinks for you—"

"He can do that. But he mustn't feel for me or decide for me—"

"He must just make you happy, then, in the traditional manner."

Veronika stirred the fire with the poker and regarded the havoc in the coals. She could never remember that you shouldn't stir an open fire like that. Her mother always did.

"I have a kind of premonition," she told Daggett. "I have a premonition or superstition that the time is going to come when I won't expect happiness. I can get along without it all right, you know. But I'm always trying to arrange things so that I'll get it some day or so that things won't be out of order if it comes along."

"Happiness is for half-wits plucking imaginary daisies," answered Daggett, a little roughly. "But of course there's pleasure—and joy."

"I'm not sure that I could make the distinction," said Veronika.

He smiled at her.

"Well—let's say that I give you pleasure to-night and you give me joy. But neither of us is happy, possibly. I suppose it's natural that you should chase after your happiness. I've often been impatient myself with people who let young boys and girls strain so after an impossibility, and call it part of youth."

"Yes," she answered, and he saw that she wasn't listening particularly—that she was letting her mind run loose and whither it would. Daggett pulled his chair closer to hers with a deft movement. Life was not too full of such delightful interludes. Underneath his sophistication he was bitterly lonely in the most intimate and fundamental way for touches and caressing words. His sister, keyed high, had sent him out like a crusader. And he was going to France on the next day. He wanted to believe in love, or at least in something beautiful, and he couldn't at all. But he could for the minute believe in Veronika, so warm and scarlet and actual, so full of childlike honesties and eagernesses about life, so ready for it and yet unmarred.

"You love your husband, don't you?"

"Yes—I love Stewart. It's magic—love, isn't it? A few years ago I didn't know him, and now he's eclipsed all the feeling I've had for people I've always known. That keeps surprising me."

"A month ago I didn't know you and to-night you seem the only warm bright creature in this shivering apprehensive London."

She turned to him in surprise.

"You didn't like me at first."

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He laughed. "I didn't like your sentences," he corrected her. "I suppose I liked you all along. It was what made me hunt you up. And now it's rather a problem to sit here and tie myself down with a lot of threads of convention—pretend that they are ropes strong enough to keep me from making love to you."

There was no shock in what he said.

"I suppose you shouldn't," she said meditatively, "but it does seem hard to send you out in the wet again. I've always liked to keep people warm and comfortable if I could. We never were very comfortable at home and it was always a struggle to get even a little warmth and peace. That's why I still suffer so when people don't have it—why I can't hold out against Stewart even if I know he's been wrong and I've been right. If I see he's unhappy, I give in. Then he thinks I'm easy—"

"In all that generosity there ought to be something for me?"

"Of course," she answered gently and was foolish enough to stroke his hand, to wake all the loneliness, to rouse the thirst that she couldn't slake, because if she could she would not have been Veronika with her delicacies, her modesties. She never forgot the drop of her heart into terror and the amazed realization that he didn't feel unlike Stewart as he held her head pressed against his uniform, and the sharp scratch of an edge of his service badge on her cheek. She did not struggle with him. He held her in that violent grasp—and she thought, "All men's kisses are much alike, aren't they," and then he held her off with tender arms.

"No—you haven't the scope. I mustn't spoil you. It's been a good evening. But I think I'll go."

Veronika was still standing by the fire, her cheeks

flaming to the color of her dress, when she heard the outer door click and then downstairs the thud of the street door. She put her hand up to feel the scratch on her cheek. It wasn't bleeding. A clock in a church a few squares away began to boom. It was ten o'clock. She recalled that it was Christmas Eve, and that the way she was celebrating it was unseemly. Her moment of untrammelled expansion was gone, and in its stead came a host of prohibitions and painful scruples. She should be in church on Christmas Eve. She should be—God knew—in the confessional.

The thought refused to be stilled. Going into the great bedroom she put on a long cloak and a close black hat. No sooner did she feel that cold, clay-like fog brushing her cheek than she regretted her impulse and wished she were back in the warm rose-colored flat. But she was held now by superstition. She wouldn't turn back from going to church. She knew that she was God-driven and did not dare deny her God, so on she went through the streets toward the chapel which she sometimes frequented and was at least a little familiar. London surrounded her, coldly unaware of her scurrying little presence—London, unhurried by destiny, past master of life, wrapped in its gray garments. Veronika was small and alien, and she knew how she appeared. Yet she wanted her tiny soul to speak to this soul of London. Vaguely she felt that her spirit could match its spirit in temper if not in strength. As she went on she forgot her fear and her isolation grew magical. She walked rapidly and directly so that those who passed would not doubt that she was abroad on a definite errand, and the few passers, a couple of officers, a big man in a caped overcoat and opera hat, a man and woman talking

so eagerly that their bodies sagged toward each other—these saw a tall girl in a gray, furred cloak, whose pale face was clear against the mist and whose dark eyes had excitement in them that was neither happy nor unhappy—only stirred.

To reach the little chapel one went down a flight of stone steps. The chapel was underground where it had been for hundreds of years, once no doubt the crypt of a monastery. Above it was a school or convent of some sort, but the chapel itself was preserved in its antiquities. It was cold and holy and candles rose gravely on its altars. It revered a powerful and awful God surrounded by his hierarchy. Veronika liked it to be so.

Here Christmas was purely the birth of Christ. No holly berries, no red-filled stockings, no gaudy trees, no symbols of the junketing that Christmas had become and that Veronika had always known it to be in Valhalla. Yet she found herself not unprepared for this as if the observation of the feast in the tawdry way she had known it had somehow made her ready.

In a rear pew were two old women, old women such as always frequent Catholic churches, half cowering over their prayers, cuddling to them some comfort of eternity, after children have gone from their arms and life has grown sterile. A widow in new black clothes knelt before one of the Stations of the Cross. The altar was ready for the midnight Mass. Vases of red poinsettias, great flaring flowers that had lost their suggestion of heat and were flat and velvet like the embroidery on a priest's vestment, stood on either side of the tabernacle.

A purple curtain over the door of the confessional trembled, and a boy came out, a young man in uniform scarcely more than twenty. There was something mag-

nificent and infinitely pathetic in his appearance, so young, so smart in his new uniform and so medieval as he sought absolution before going out to kill or be killed. His manner was casual, like that of a boy going to Communion, kneeling hastily, somewhat perfunctory. Veronika did not see him leave the church. She took her place in the confessional on the women's side.

In the priest's tiny nook behind the gratings and velvet curtains was a Jesuit, bred into steely reason of religion. He was not unkind—nor kind. He was like a finely balanced scale weighing sins. He knew what each sin should weigh, how much it counted in the sight of the welfare of the church and of humanity—in the sight of God, who wanted his church to grow and who tolerated no slipshod human emotion kindly. There was no tinge of the Celt or Latin in him, those two natures which have done so much to humanize and make tender the burden of pure religion. To such a one came Veronika, palpitant, Veronika the bride who had no children and who had no intention of allowing herself to have any until it suited her convenience, Veronika who had been in the arms of a man not her husband only an hour ago.

When she left the confessional Veronika felt as if she had been beaten. With strange people all around her now she knelt through the celebration of the Mass and that too seemed to shut her out. At the ringing of the bells she bowed almost in terror, terror because there was no repentance or consciousness of sin in her, terror that she could not strike her breast in humility.

White-robed boys sang Christmas carols, caroling of a Christmas which was solemn and purified. A sudden flare of electric lights made the sanctuary bewilderingly bright for the Benediction, and the old hymns that she

had heard so many times in the Westover convent gave Veronika a fainting wave of homesickness. Then the service was over and as the rest of the congregation were drawing cloaks and furs around them, Veronika went into the street again.

She meant to call a taxi, but she could not find one at first and when one did appear and she beckoned it, it went on past her, then turned and came back, the cab door opened and a man inside leaned out.

"Want a ride, darling?"

She turned away quickly and went down a side street, her heart jumping at the insult. The fog was thick and yellow now, and she walked blindly against it for a square or two, then turned to retrace her steps. Somehow she had missed the way. In the blurry glare of a street lamp she read an unfamiliar name at the street crossing. She was lost and to her excited tremulous mind the matter took on huge proportions. It was symbolic and the end of things. The words of the priest, scathing her sins, seemed to come through the darkness, like disembodied spirits. She tried to hold to the thought of Stewart, but his image retreated until he was only her partner in sin, as the priest had said. Everything was gone, erased by the fog, except her shivering spirit and its God. Mechanically, she walked on, thinking that she must find a policeman. But all the time she knew that no policeman could set her straight. He could not do more than direct her to the flat, and even there back of the fog she would feel God bewildering her, refusing her until she made her peace with Him. She would please Him by having children. But it was so strange, so remote to give herself up to that, and the world was strange enough already. It was terrifying penance.

The fog saturated her. Her hair hung in wisps, and she could feel her face wet and slippery and unlike itself. A clock struck one. She thought of Valhalla and remembered that an ocean lay between her and Valhalla. Stewart might never come back from Scotland. Perhaps she was abandoned here in London. She had only five or six pounds.

She was praying helplessly, not sure if it were fog or tears upon her cheeks. The words of a familiar convent prayer came into her head. One of the nuns had told her to say it when she was in trouble.

"Oh, Blessed Mother, who has never refused any one who had recourse—to thee—" Fear left her, stilled by the familiar words. She stumbled along, clinging to a garment of divinity which she seemed to touch in the mist. If it was demanded that she plunge deeper into life, bear children, not at will, but blindly, that too she would do. All her natural mysticism rose to the challenge of the fog and her own storming soul. Ever more secret, ever more intricate, ever more difficult and more alluring was life.

With reverent superstition she turned a corner into a square where queer yellow lights showed like strange eyes. There was a bobby, swinging his club. She called and he turned, scanning her in superior fashion.

"I'm lost," she said. "Can you get me a taxi?"

He seemed doubtful as to whether he should not give her in charge, and she realized how she must look, wild-eyed and pallid, with disheveled hair.

"How did you happen to be out?" he asked curiously.

"I was at church."

At last the door of the house where she lived closed behind her again and she thought, as she stole quietly up

the stairs, that the keepers of the apartment house might suspect her of almost anything. But she forgot that as she opened her door, for there, still wrapped in his coat, but with the fragments of a dozen cigarettes to show his waiting had been long and impatient, was Stewart. He had no chance to ask her where she had been. She clung to him with an eagerness and delight that was unlike her.

"When did you get home?" The happiness in her tone was too clear to question.

"I got through and came home to surprise you. And then you'd gone out—at this time of night. Haven't you more sense?"

"I went to church and got lost in the fog. The priest says we're sinners, but we aren't—or won't be. I don't feel sinful. What a way things have of coming out right after they've been all wrong! Isn't it wonderful?"

He sighed, half in impatience.

"Why do you do such things, Veronika? Why do you let them upset you so?"

She had forgotten. He didn't want her upset. Well—she would keep her revelation to herself.

CHAPTER V

THOUGH the war let them alone except for surface manifestations, it dug under the life of Stewart and Veronika. They had come with reasonably orthodox ideas of marriage and love into a country which was being shaken out of orthodoxy. Stewart took the war without sentiment, but without complete aloofness, as a man who looks on some one's else calamity with the reflection, "It might just as well have happened to me." It hadn't happened to Stewart, and presumably wouldn't happen to the United States, but it might have. There was a cool readiness in his attitude which was kin to sympathy.

Of course he was unable to escape the pervading sense around him that life was not as stable as every one had supposed, and that great events were on the march, that principles which had held true for most people would be questioned and analyzed to bits. People were talking a good deal about life, haltingly, unaccustomedly, for generalities had been left to literary and religious professionals too long to come easily to the run of men. But boys were killed, and hate flourished openly and agony was common, so that it became natural for people to strike deeper into life than they had done. It was no longer embarrassing to do it. Some called the new spirit hysteria and some patriotism and it was both, and more than both.

Veronika had much of Stewart's thought. She stirred him more than he expected to be stirred or wanted to be

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stirred. But beyond Veronika was the world of which she seemed unconscious, the world in which things happened which were not happening to her. To Veronika everything had to be linked to herself or it didn't exist for her. Stewart found that out and it baffled him. For tying everything up with yourself meant perpetual emotional excitement and Stewart didn't like too much of that—or trust too much of it.

The ignorance of Veronika surprised him, too. There was her charming ignorance of ugly things, her ignorance which was synonymous with innocence. But there was, too, her ignorance which was astonishing lack of information. She knew, he discovered, almost nothing of history, little of geography. He couldn't talk to her except of things which happened recently. She had no background except Valhalla, college and Westover's convent, and of those three it was Valhalla which was strongest, Valhalla which seemed to remain undimmed in color while the others faded. Nor was it the Valhalla of which Stewart thought, the important site of ore mines which might mean money. Veronika was still absurdly tied to that rubbishy little house where she had been brought up and to her altogether distressing family.

Stewart liked people. He had come of a family which had been sufficiently well connected and maintained for social intercourse to be easy. He discovered that Veronika's shrinkings annoyed him now and then. He had thought it would be easy to make her enjoy things and people, but he saw vaguely after a little that her habit of enjoyment was secret and intimate. So their deep personal relationship was very true and beautiful and their social relationship which lives by connection with the outside world was not always satisfactory.

There were places to which Stewart could go by himself. He liked the rather coarse flavor of the music halls—he knew a club or two where he could go and drink excellent liquor. But he could never simply go. He had to detach himself artificially from Veronika, who would sit alone in the flat and read or write letters home. And he would be conscious of her there, fine and alluring, but slightly boring. There would be a slight sense of guilt at leaving her, which was annoying because neither of them believed that a man should not be free to leave his wife for an evening. Yet secretly she was aggrieved and he felt guilty if he went without her.

His New York connections wanted him to stay on in London until the spring or summer and see how things developed. He was employing his time to much advantage, quietly and subtly. There were things to be found out and Stewart knew how to do it, avenues of approach to be opened so that action could be swift when it was known which way this cat of war was going to jump. Stewart did that sort of thing extremely well. He made friends and gathered opinions and appeared to waste days, but he found out exactly what he wanted to know as he wasted time and mulled things over with himself or with others. But his lack of definite hours and of definite tasks bothered Veronika, and to be sure it was not a very tangible outlook which she had. She soon saw shrewdly that Stewart, who before marriage had seemed to her the acme of stable strength, was volatile, and that he could not be counted on as a breadwinner who would leave her at eight every morning and return at six every night. Secretly she had wanted that kind of order in her life. She wanted her dreams of romance and grandeur, but more immediately she yearned for the order and

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peace and stability which she had never had, and she could be possessed with terror at the thought that she might not always have it.

So she pressed Stewart.

"When are we going home, Stewart?"

"I don't know exactly. Aren't you happy here?"

"You know that I'm happy. But oughtn't we to be doing something definite?"

He would laugh at that tone when she took it.

"The world's damned indefinite just now. What do you mean?"

"But we're not getting anywhere."

"We're not getting blown up anyway like lots of people."

"Stewart, you know what I mean. I mean we ought to have a place on the earth that belongs to us. We can't just drift."

But there was enough of the drifter in Stewart to pull away from that. He did want to drift somewhat. At least he wanted to be free to drift. He wanted to marry Veronika and take her away from her tight, cheap little surroundings—and, even as she accused him, play something of the King Cophetua. He had shown her a new world, a world that made him hold his breath secretly because it was so driven and mad. And Veronika, built for romance, was going primly through it, asking when they should settle down. She was lovely and delicious, but Stewart began to have a slight skepticism about women as he smoked his interminable cigarette. There was a basis for all these old jokes. Oh, well, she was beautiful and his own and he loved her. She could make him love her so intensely—she could be such a creature of flame and delight that it was hard to believe

she could turn to him a few hours later and say, "But, Stewart, oughtn't we to plan about how we are to live?"

He felt that he knew how they were to live. Give him half a chance and he'd build her palaces, if he could get this steel business by the neck, prove himself invaluable.

"Who pays our bills while we're here, Stewart?"

"I've told you. Consolidated steel. I suppose most of the actual money for the investigation has been put up by Mr. Henderson. He's the one that gave me the idea of coming over and then backed me up in it."

"He's the one whose cousin lives in Westover?"

"That's the one. But there's no Westover about him. He's big business. Why, Ronny, if I put across what I want to put across, this money won't seem more than a dime to him. You don't realize how these men think. Come on, darling, let's dine out. Let's go to the Carlton—you, in your bronze dress with all the officers staring at you."

To the Carlton they would go and Stewart would be super gallant, especially if he had just slightly too much liquor. Then in the morning a bit dull and there was nothing for Veronika to do but wander around the flat or do a little war work somewhere. But there was such a plenitude of women doing war work and if you couldn't get excited about it they always grew icy cold and sometimes angry.

Then one day there was a letter from Lily and by the same mail one from Aunt Kate. They had the same news in them. Grandfather Pearse had died, easily, peacefully, slipping away one summer afternoon when the sun was bright. Aunt Kate described it well. Those things meant so much to Aunt Kate—how her kin died,

whether there was a "struggle at the end," or not, and what the funeral arrangements were and the choosing of Mass cards. She described the ceremonies accurately and well, having written many such letters, and Veronika had a swift backward vision of her grandfather at the time of her grandmother's death. He was dead now too.

Because he sat no longer in that chair by the side of the window things had altered tremendously for Lily. Lily inherited his money. It was not yet clear how much there was, but there might be forty or fifty thousand dollars. Aunt Kate wrote of it, "I know you will be glad of it for Lily. Both of you girls are finely settled now—it's nice for your father to have his girls off his hands financially." And Lily said, "Grandfather left me his money. It's a delightful thing to have happen to you—inheriting money like that. Of course, I am sorry he's gone, you know. Sorry that he's dead. Yet being human, the other thought overshadows sorrow—he was old. Think of it, Ronny. It means a lot here in New York to have a little money of your own. It means I'm not at the mercy of managers. I can back myself a little while I'm trying to get on and do what I want. I can get the clothes to look the part. I shall spend what there is. There's more to be had and this will be an investment in me."

Lily was rarely expansive. Life had flowered for her out of the old man's death. Veronika knew how she would look—just the proper amount of mourning clothes—nothing really ugly—all very effective. Lily spent money so well. It was all right. Veronika wasn't jealous. No one would imagine she had a right to be. She'd married a Royden and gone to Europe. Lily ought

to have the money of course. Yet Veronika thought a little soberly, with a little sigh in her heart, of the freedom it gave Lily to have it—the freedom of choice. She could marry when she pleased and whom she pleased. There'd be no rush about it—no feeling as Veronika had felt, that something must be done to bolster up the family—no taking a chance on love. Lily would— She stopped, not letting her thoughts stray into even the ante-chambers of disloyalty to Stewart.

Money of your own is different from your husband's money, just the same, she concluded, and because her congratulation of Lily was not quite whole-souled she felt the need of bolstering it up. She would send a cable. She knew where Stewart sent cables. She would go down to that office. Just then it occurred to her that cables were expensive, and she didn't have much money. Very little, in fact. Two days ago she had suggested to Stewart that she could use some and he had put her off until the next day. He seemed to have forgotten. In her purse were only ten shillings—and with lunch—no, she couldn't send a cable until Stewart came home. That thought galled her more than the knowledge of Lily's inheritance. She went out to walk off a slight depression. Odd, how often she had to leave the flat for that. Outside of their rooms something always distracted her, held her, the wind on a bus top, the sight of flower women, fat old bonneted women in the middle of a square, a showing of pictures in some professional gallery—there were things that took you out of your thoughts, were they unpleasant. Also there were the casual glances of men and women that made you feel beautiful and sent you off into a dream that you were as you wanted to be.

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She was at the street door when a sense of unusual excitement penetrated to her. The cook who came for her orders every morning was leaning out of the basement window talking to the valet, who stood on the steps, his thin face aflame with something. Veronika wondered and went on, drawing on her glove. The eyes of the servants followed her and somehow she knew that they were hostile.

On Regent Street she felt the same excitement. The war news must be exceptional, for the cry lately had been "business as usual" in popular chorus. She stopped at a street corner to get a paper and read the communique. There leapt at her a strange headline—"GERMANS USE POISONOUS GASES . . . TERRIBLE CASUALTIES."

A woman passed her, the tears streaming down her cheeks, talking under her breath. They didn't often act like that, these Englishwomen. Veronika stood still to read and what she read sickened her, sickened her—and then, rising for the first time in her, came that passion of anger that she had seen so often in the people around her, anger and hate. To come upon soldiers like that—one knew that they were mowed down by machine guns, but at least the tradition of guns and of self-defense remained. This wholesale choking, this poisoning, dying in agony, fighting an invisible and inhuman foe destroyed the tradition. It was so ridiculous as well as terrible to throw people into eternity in such horrible masses and then make an eventful occasion of the death of an old man somewhere across the ocean. When such things happened—if such things could happen—all Veronika's dreams, little ambitions and involvements were blown away like so much rubbish blowing

down the street in a windstorm. There, alone, on a street corner, with the half-penny paper in her hand, teaching her fact and philosophy through its stark black print, Veronika had her first mature thought—the first thought that lifted her out of her grave self-absorbed childhood and girlhood of personal relations into adult consciousness of the world as it would be without her, as it was outside of her and the whole tribe of Pearses and their problems. For months she had been reading of battles and death lists and atrocities and had been sorry and aghast and puzzled, with thin little emotions as unmeaning as the words. She had talked war and listened to discourses on world politics, and never once had the matter transcended a difficulty with Stewart or the problem of what Tom would do with his wife.

She did not try to formulate what she was feeling. She was beyond that need, that extra egotism. She wandered on down Regent Street, her eyes so blurred that she only avoided passers-by automatically and did not even hear Mrs. Torrance calling to her from the car until that lady drew up by the curb and sent her chauffeur to speak to Veronika. Mrs. Torrance was one of the women whom Veronika avoided when she could, because of her war violences, but to-day she was not bothering with that.

“Are they really doing that?” asked Veronica.

Mrs. Torrance nodded. It was the first time she had seen any feeling in Veronika about the war and she was instantly kindly.

“I’m on my way now,” she said, “to make gas masks. There’s a call from one of the workrooms here. We shall work all night and all day till we’ve equipped every soldier.” She was one of the Englishwomen who made

a point of looking exalted. Veronika had said of her the other day to Stewart that she probably managed to look exalted even in her sleep. That the absurdity of her poses masked real emotion Veronika guessed for the first time. She got into the car and the women went together to an improvised workroom, a ballroom in Lady Somebody's house, crowded already with middle-aged women making the masks on incredibly short notice—those first useless masks that were never used, that hundreds and hundreds of women made during those first days of fear of gas, firmly believing that little pieces of gauze (to be soaked in some patent unnamed chemical) would save their sons and husbands and the sons and husbands of other women. Veronika engaged on her futile task, folding and pressing the gauze masks eagerly, quickly, and listening to the quiet talk, tightened under the pressure of fear.

It was a strange afternoon. Veronika always remembered the sight of all these women, high-colored Englishwomen, their unaffected, restrained, intelligent faces all wearing a single expression, a blend of hurry and fear. The expression dropped down over Veronika's own face. She heard them speak of mines, submarines, of the fact that American ships were to be submarined, that England might be isolated, of Zeppelin raids, and for the first time the idea came that all this might happen to her. Any night the bombs might strike London—they might be killed in their beds.

She had known of course. But not known like this, through sudden sickening knowledge, that the unbelievable was not only for other people who had let themselves in for it—but that she herself might find these things realities. Those soldiers—swept so cruelly, so unexpect-

edly by that gas, choking, falling back in agonies, had not expected anything so torturous. But they got it.

"Will America come in now?" asked Mrs. Torrance almost triumphantly, "when she hears of this?"

"Will your president still keep on talking about being too proud to fight?" That was some one else questioning her.

"How can a country bear to fatten on her mother country's slaughter?"

Veronika looked at them darkly. Under the attempt to put their questions decently, she saw the resentment again, the hate of these women that she roused in them because she was free from fear so far—and safe. They wanted her to suffer too. They were like sick people enraged at the sight of another's health. The glances hurt her. She didn't know what to say because she could not remember those balanced reasons Stewart gave in argument—something about the government of the United States making a declaration of war being no simple matter—something about division in Congress—something about America being more valuable if she stayed out and helped in supplying the foreign countries with money and food. Even if she could remember she couldn't satisfy the look in the eyes of these women. They wanted more than money or clothes or food from her and her country. They wanted suffering. They wanted her fear as a kind of hostage from her.

The room, full of white-clad women, seemed to hold a mob spiritually attacking her. Still they kept questioning her.

She shook her head desperately.

"I don't know what we'll do. I don't know how people feel over there. They haven't seen—they can't know—"

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"Can't they read?"

"If you had a son would you like to have him gassed?"

Guessing at the son within her, Veronika shuddered, not through love of her unborn child, but at the knowledge that these women had experienced these secret experiences and now saw them come to ghastly fruition—the room swam with whiteness, dreadful, vengeful whiteness. Stewart would be angry if she were sick, say that she'd brought it on herself by trying to do things like this. She mustn't be sick.

They saw and, having made her suffer, were suddenly merciful.

"The child's pale," said some one to Mrs. Torrance.

"Young bride," whispered Mrs. Torrance, and the suggestion of bridehood, with its implications, went through the group quickly.

Mrs. Torrance leaned to Veronika.

"You mustn't mind us. We're a frightened lot of old women to-day. We're terror-struck. We've stood a lot and we can stand a lot more. But this—this gas—" She shook her head pathetically, her eyes on her two sons in imagination, her face drawn, with its exalted look erased and instead dread of calamity written on it. They bent over their gas masks, each one with her bitter thoughts and her female determination to lay the responsibility for their use at some door. Veronika kept on folding. Perhaps, she thought naïvely, if I fold a lot of these, they'll know that I do care—terribly. It hurt to fold so constantly. Her back ached so much these last weeks and her head had a way of paining and blurring. That would be part of it, of course, unless something dreadful was really the matter with her. Unless she were going to die with some hideous secret com-

plication. The world was full of terror, within her and without her. She no longer belonged to herself. She belonged to this invading child and to a world at war, a friendless world that separated her from everything familiar, that insisted on dragging her away from dreams and ambitions and plans into a frenzy of upset lives and tangled conditions. She didn't want this maturity, this war, this baby. She wanted to be Veronika Pearse again, that troubled person who was yet so delightful to live with secretly. The emergence that was demanded of her and which could not be refused was terrible.

Mrs. Torrance took her home two hours later. Her last words were what might be expected of her. She had passed the first shock.

"We must carry on," she said, and smiled exaltedly.

Veronika hated the words and the matching expression.

That night as she read more dispatches from the front she found Daggett's name in the list of killed. The war affronted her personally for the first time as she stared at it.

"Stewart—Colonel Daggett's killed."

He looked over her shoulder to verify it.

"That fellow we met at Winchester? Too bad, isn't it?"

"It's ghastly! I can't bear it!"

"Oh, now, my dear, you mustn't take it like that. You know we're absolutely bound to keep meeting people who are going to be killed. You've just got to take what comes."

Veronika had a romantic sense of how much Daggett had needed her. She hadn't done anything for him at all. It intensified her feeling that she thought America should come into the war.

"Why doesn't the United States fight?" she asked savagely.

Stewart laughed at her.

"Maybe we will, in our own good time."

He saw the tears in her eyes and stopped.

"Veronika, you must remember that you shouldn't get too excited. In your condition—"

She knew by now that tears and hysterics didn't endear her to Stewart. But to-night they were surely her right. Only later, when she was calm, did she realize how they bored him and how he had put up with her storm of weeping. He hadn't loved her while it was going on either. Another fear stole into her. There didn't seem to be anywhere to turn for safety and restoration. Outside of life with Stewart was the storm of war and within that life were things that sought to destroy it.

It had seemed wonderful to sleep in a room with a glowing fireplace at first. To-night in spite of the fire and her satin quilts she kept shivering. What was it Daggett had said—"fools plucking imaginary daisies." Oh, there must be happiness—somewhere.

CHAPTER VI

WITH the spring, London began to stop prophesying just how long the war would last or just what the war would involve. Scarborough had been shelled, a challenge to possibility. Terrible things had happened in Flanders. Gallipoli was the first great humiliation that England had to bear. Zeppelins hovered, half romantic and half terrifying, and the air was black with reality, but also shot with fantasy. For those who were not at the battle front were in many cases still prey to the strange romance of war, charged with its high emotions. Grief and despair were to come later, but the thing was not yet long drawn out enough for such feeling to be general and even those who sorrowed were unbowed by it and upheld by that stimulant of sacrifice which pervaded the nation's women.

After the death of Daggett Veronika felt that she had a stake in the war. It had been necessary to her, even though she had awakened to the meaning of what was happening around her on the afternoon of the gas attack. But Daggett made it very real. Some one who had cared for her had been killed, and though that caring had been the accident of chance and the development of a mood none the less Veronika took it seriously. War dispatches and descriptions of battles began to live for her now. Yet the war did not ally her to a group. As she had always been personal in her religion so was she personal in her feeling about the war. It was partly due to her way of living, to the fact that she belonged to no

close circle of friends. Her doctor had told her to walk for her health and as she walked she found queer unmatched manifestations of war everywhere and wove them into a pattern of her own. Socialists talked bitterly in Hyde Park and she sat on park benches and listened to them trying to persuade the world of a conviction by spellbinding handfuls of people. She found a little open-faced bookshop whose shelves prided themselves on containing only radical literature. Here were the controversial journals from all over the world—here the books written by minds which hunted outside popular conviction, as absorbed in protest against the war as any recruiting officer was in his furtherance of it. She even went, timorously, for Veronika was no striding social worker, into the side rooms of public houses where red-faced charwomen, richer than ever before in their lives because their husbands or sons were at the front and they were drawing war pensions, chattered of the war in cockney phrases that she could hardly understand. Stewart laughed at these excursions. He was so much wiser than she in general experience of people that he could not understand that these ventures supplied her with a knowledge that was necessary to her now—that Veronika could only realize the war through her own contacts with things and people. Stewart was absorbed and more or less worried these days. There was Veronika who had to be taken care of, who should be brought back to America before her child was born if possible—and his own plans in which achievement became more difficult as uncertainty deepened. He thought that if he could settle either Veronika or some definite business action he would be able to handle the other uncertainty, but Veronika was as difficult as his business. She could

have gone down into Devonshire with the Liptons. Lipton was likely to have a hand in awarding government contracts. He had urged that on her. The Liptons had been very good to Stewart, and he had every reason for wanting to cement that friendship. Mrs. Lipton apprised of Veronika's condition had urged that she come, and Veronika's reluctance had fringed on discourtesy. She couldn't bear to leave Stewart. In that emotion Stewart had found some delight of course—they had a day or two of love-making after the Devonshire plans were abandoned which carried them back to the very earliest days of their marriage. But then Stewart saw clearly that she should have gone—that it would have given him a “stand-in” with Mr. Lipton to have Veronika as the guest of his wife.

Stewart knew that you had to indulge a woman in Veronika's condition, but as her moods multiplied he wished rather desperately for help in doing it. Nor could he help seeing that she hardly had the situation in proper proportions before her. Her child—his child—was infinitely important, but still one could remain more normal. Whims perhaps, extravagant desires, those one might expect. But her soarings of mood, her exaltations and depressions, were beyond normality. She expected him to accompany her in every mood and was impatient that his approaching fatherhood did not make him absolutely hers. All the vanity of the woman in pregnancy for the first time, coupled with its fears and its loneliness and its selfishnesses, were hers and that this experience, so darkly mysterious in itself, did not come to her with a placid background of sheltered life, but against the fearsome background of war with its volcanic importance, made the event in strange harmony with Veronika's

life so far. For nothing had ever come to her in proper and prescribed fashion—neither childhood, nor religion, nor love. Controversy and disorder swirled around her and through it she held one hand fiercely tense, putting things back in order and checking her own experiences often for the sake of maintaining an orthodoxy which she hardly knew and certainly had had no chance to love.

The war dwarfed her now, but it was in consonance with her trouble. Uncertainty and roused emotion were there. Back to Veronika came the old Valhalla moods—the waking to knowledge of trouble—the invading pity for herself and for other people—lapses into hysteria and the ability to rise easily out of hysteria again. That Stewart could not understand. Hysteria had not been his daily food as it had been Veronika's. Hysteria was for tremendous occasions and the effects of it altogether devastating. A Pearse rose like a phoenix out of hysteria, but not so Stewart. He hated that losing of control of one's self, the exposure of emotion, and he had been trained that resentment is not a thing to be entered into lightly—nor being entered to be left readily.

So he made allowances for Veronika's condition, but that she should want him to share that condition or demand that his moods match hers, when he had discovered hers already to be so transitory, was abhorrent to him. There were times too when doubts crept into Stewart's mind and he thought, "Of course it's absurd. It's her condition—entirely. But if she should turn into an hysterical shrewish woman, what can a man do? It isn't as if she didn't have everything done that it's possible for any one to do for a woman in her condition. She wanted the baby—men should stand things, but only up to a certain point—" By things he meant the occa-

sions on which Veronika could grow silent and brood over absurdities like the exact date of their return to America, which poor Stewart could not and dared not fix until he had some government contracts to show the Consolidated Steel directors. Veronika seemed to understand so little that business was in flux.

When the Consolidated Steel had bought up the little foundries around New York and Pennsylvania and among them the one in Westover, which had made the Royden fortune, Stewart had seen opportunity loom large before him. He knew Dean Henderson personally and he knew how much Henderson liked him, liked his mind, his habit of thought and pleasant manners, his thoroughly sound philosophy which had no accent of the smart, well-pressed, made-to-order young business man full of commonplaces. Stewart thought for himself, not more than was fitting, certainly not enough to carry him into the class of philosophers, but enough to assure himself mental independence. He was independent in act too—as marrying Veronika had showed. And these things Henderson had noted no doubt, for he had left Stewart in charge of the Westover foundry, the leading voice of its local directorate, and had also attached him to the New York offices, the export center of Consolidated Steel. It was Henderson who had sent Stewart to Valhalla to report on the wisdom of acquiring new ore properties. It was Henderson who had sent him abroad to size up the market for steel and make friendships and alliances which would be valuable and finally to get government contracts. It was Henderson whose eye was on Stewart now and from whom sharp, mandatory cables with advice, confirmation and instruction came. Stewart knew why Henderson valued him—for

the maturity of his outlook in spite of his young manhood and for the discretion of his judgments.

But he knew too that Henderson was hard and unsentimental, and that one of his creeds was the complete separation of business from private life. Henderson's private life had been stormy enough. He had had two divorces already which had been meat for the newspapers. But those episodes seemed to have left absolutely no trace on his business life. Whether he gave such things any measure of emotion or not Stewart did not know. He knew that Henderson liked pleasure and that no man of his acquaintance was more quickly appreciative of a woman's beauty, more interested in theatrical displays of beauty or more lavish in his entertainment. Both his wives had been notorious and unchecked spenders. But Henderson remained in control of himself while vast numbers of people read in the papers of his reasons for his divorces. Stewart had seen him during the progress of the last one and there had been nothing, neither tenseness nor nervousness nor absent-mindedness, to suggest that these emotional affairs took his mind off his work any more than if they had been easily dismissed conversations with the women. He had decided views about women, and Stewart knew also that his approval of Stewart's marriage had been a qualified one. His courtesy to Veronika had been unbounded. He had given a delightful dinner for her at the Ritz one night. But he had not wanted Stewart to take her abroad and had said so.

"It's a hard trip and you need every ounce of energy to put into what you're doing. You can't think of two things at once. And when you're traveling with a woman

she has every right to your entire attention. Especially a young woman like Mrs. Royden."

Stewart had said earnestly and aware that there was naïveté in the statement:

"I'm sure she will be a tremendous help to me, Mr. Henderson."

Henderson had not contradicted him or argued with him, although Stewart was ready with special pleading for Veronika because Veronika was an extraordinary person. Henderson had simply said courteously, "Well, you must be the best judge of that, of course. In war time things are so uncertain and conditions often so difficult for women that I questioned the pleasure of the trip for Mrs. Royden. And of course the duration of your trip will depend so much on conditions as they develop—"

That was exactly the reason, Stewart wanted to say, why he couldn't possibly leave Veronika. If the trip should stretch out it would be impossible to be separated. Just as he was about to make this point clear he discovered that the subject had been dismissed. That was a way his patron had and Stewart knew that it did not mean any alteration in his judgment, but merely that the matter was waived until his judgment should have proved correct in the particular instance. It often did so, though of course it wouldn't in this case. Veronika was an educated woman, not at all the type of person whom Henderson had run across in his experiences with women. Veronika would help. Besides he couldn't leave her. Put an ocean between himself and Veronika? It couldn't be done. At the thought his heart grew hot with emotional tenderness and desire. He had thought he would change Henderson's point of view when he

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put some big contracts across and there must be opportunities or he wouldn't be sent like this.

And yet—after five months in London—he had done a great deal of prospecting, but he could not get the contracts. Not that the results or lack of them had anything to do with Veronika. Of course if he had been alone he would have done things a bit differently. He hated to admit even to himself that Veronika's lack of social experience, her presence, without the ability to mix easily, had been in any way a drag. But there had been some chances they had missed. The way to play this was to be sympathetic with the English, of course not going too far, but to be friendly, sympathetic, to get acquainted, make them like you, and get their business. Veronika felt the war now, of course. But her expression of her feeling was so often unfortunate. In Stewart's phrase she "worked herself up" over it, which didn't help any one, neither the war nor her condition—and certainly not business. Sympathetic affability was the thing. That was what she ought to offer these Britishers. And she was continually not seeing things as they were, because of her ignorance of geography and history.

The winter passed and just as Veronika was beginning to feel stronger and more like her healthy self, there came, as if in celebration, the glory of the English spring. The sun, which had been for months obscured, suddenly poured down upon London. May trees blossomed, and they motored through the country on Sunday afternoons. Veronika felt again that she was in her storybook world, as she looked at sturdy old villages with stone houses and ivy-covered cottages as only an American used to the monotony and fragility of wooden buildings can

look. The last two weeks of April seemed to shake off a good deal of overhanging horror. Veronika relaxed and Stewart, feeling that his work was going well, confided to her some of his recent successes. There might be contracts with Belgium as well as England. It all looked good. In imagination he built and spent a fortune for her. That was rather unlike Stewart, but he had his secret visions of the coming child and had already begun in characteristic fashion to decide on all the drawbacks he should not have, all the habits that he would not develop. With the world toppling around them, and Stewart at least knew that it was toppling, they took time to dream and plan.

Every one was doing that during those weeks. The first reaction from the intensity of strain had come. Amusements were revived, ostensibly for the soldiers coming home for week-ends, but actually because even those at home needed and wanted them. The first exaltation had passed—the first mourning was over. Individual griefs and national gravity would still increase indefinitely, but the initial shock was over.

So it was with Veronika's pregnancy. She was growing accustomed to it. She flattered herself that she was doing some social things more skillfully too. Like handling Mavory, who did not mind coming to the flat now or dash away as soon as dinner was over. Mavory, from having been a fresh, red-faced young Englishman had grown into a rather weather-beaten one after one single winter's campaign. He did not care to talk about the war when he came to see them, not even about the mechanical phases of it. America interested him only because like all the rest he was completely unable to comprehend her strange point of view. But Veronika

was no longer antagonistic to Mavory. Even his stupidities seemed pathetic and his coarseness, augmented as it was, did not trouble her too much. They all went to a music hall once and Stewart was delighted with what he considered Veronika's new expansiveness, but Veronika marveled as she watched the men that they could sit together and watch a dull-faced, yellow-haired girl kick through a dance and evidently enjoy it. To-morrow Stewart would be her attentive husband and Mavory, absorbed in his business, would be on his way back to a succession of disagreeable and probably hideous experiences. But neither of them seemed to have anything in mind now except the yellow-haired girl. There was a joke, which seemed to Veronika both dull and distasteful and the men laughed uproariously. Stewart was certainly not thinking either of Veronika nor of his child. He shouldn't laugh about jokes like that, cheap jokes about married people. But he often was amused by such things as if the holiness of much of their experience could be doffed or forgotten.

She knew what her mother would have said, how even Lily would have shrugged the thoughts away before they rankled. "Men are like that." But men shouldn't be like that according to Veronika's carefully built hope of a world. And they weren't always.

The yellow-haired girl threw a fresh impertinence at the audience, displayed a plump and dazzling back and was gone from the stage. Stewart turned to Veronika—

"Not so bad, was she?"

"Wasn't she?" asked Veronika with rather chilling emphasis.

Across her head the eyes of the two men met in secret amusement. Veronika was excluded from their joviality. Anger was her first swift answer, but she found herself concealing it with new guile.

Then a troop of girls came on the stage and she suddenly felt heavy and unattractive. The men beside her, smoking, appraising the girls, seemed formidable. She longed to somehow interpose between their comfortable enjoyment and the beauty before them some moral judgment, throwing up the age-old defense of the woman who feels her wings clipped, who begins to be fearful. For Veronika was beginning to be fearful—that she would not keep her charm, that her attractiveness would grow stale, and she was profoundly humiliated that she should feel any necessity for competing for men's attentions and affections. She was beginning to understand so many things, dimly yet and without much formulation, but still to understand them—why women became shrews if they did not watch themselves, why women found morality useful as a weapon—and other things like the great resentments that underlie feminist movements. Intellectual arguments about these things had always bored Veronika. The romantic point of view had held her. But now with her appetite whetted for adoration and having come to regard it as her due, she felt herself grow heavy with her child while, with other men, her husband admired slim girls flitting about on the stage. And Stewart was a good husband.

They went to the Carlton after the theater and found a table where they could watch the dozens of officers and girls and distinguished elderly men and women. Veronika was hungry as usual and they ate and drank

and were very gay—so gay that Veronika felt blurred as she was helped into the cab and Stewart laughed at her.

“You’re a darling to-night,” he told her, and, regardless of Mavory, whom they were taking to the station, held her close against him. She did not pull as she usually did when Stewart was slightly tipsy. It wasn’t unpleasant for once to ride with circumstance—to simply enjoy being alive for that moment.

The air in Victoria Station cleared her head, and she felt that she had been somewhat debauched.

“Good-by, Ronny,” said Mavory. He had been calling her that for the last few hours.

“Good-by,” she said.

“Can I have a kiss?” asked Mavory, and bent toward Veronika, with a glance at Stewart.

Stewart laughed.

“I’ll lend you one.”

Mavory kissed Veronika and because he was feeling gay after his liquor and because his caress was as inconsequential as it well might be, Veronika’s outrage was doubled. After he had left she stormed at Stewart.

“How could you?”

“Why, Ronny, it was only a joke.”

“So that’s all I mean to you—”

“Oh, please—dear—why must you always get things so out of proportion?”

He said it wearily, when they were back in the flat. It had been a pleasant evening, but here at the end of it was Veronika raising riot over nothing. Stewart was sleep-ridden.

She saw that he wanted sleep more than her forgiveness and that frightened her again. She let him go to

bed and felt hideously abandoned. Where could she turn to get away from war and difficulty? To get into a bright circle of safety, peace and order.

So she prayed. There were prayers that she trusted as potent and she wove them together. Hers was a strange indirect prayer, a prayer that meant to be noble and was offered for a suffering world, but a prayer that circled closely round herself and her hopes, her securities.

CHAPTER VII

I

IN August Stewart brought Veronika home, at least as far home as New York, and as much as a rented Gramercy apartment could be home. She felt it was quite completely so for a while. There was light, and the sense of destruction was lifted in a gay New York, occupied with benefits for this and that cause. But especially there was Lily, who was never disappointing. Her grandfather's money was, as she expressed it, "galloping around," and Lily regarded its profligacy as investment. She no longer looked in shop windows and calculated costs. She went in and bought, not too many things, but that exact number which would give her distinction. She was making valuable friends too. There was nothing Bohemian about Lily's circle. It was not a separatist group, but one which did what it pleased because it could afford to. Every one liked Lily because she was beautiful and had grace to carry her everywhere. And just as she dressed, she lived, with restraint. She had taken an apartment of her own in the West Fifties and furnished it. There was a plain bedroom, mostly given over to windows, a long mirror and a glass wardrobe. The living-room had an ebony piano and a rug in which colors had blended softly for a hundred years and which, Lily said, was her gift to the piano. For the rest, the furnishing had been contributed. She had let it be known that she wanted chairs and there had

been men and women who felt it a privilege to give them to her or to lend them. Nor did any one give Lily less than the exquisite.

The dining-room furniture limited Lily's parties to four—"quite enough," said Lily—but a dining-room there must be so that Lily could choose her food and have it brought to her at home instead of being at the mercy of hotels and restaurants. And there was also an incidental bedroom for a maid who could cook and do everything else that was necessary to make Lily comfortable.

Lily's spring into luxury had no effect of suddenness and none of its absurdity. She was completely prepared for it. Such of her old life as was necessary to slough off had been sloughed off. Valhalla meant nothing to her. She admitted it as the place where she was born and that was all. Her life was no pose. It had become this thing of comfort and luxury, beauty and hard work, limousines and week-ends at country places, admiration and adulation, which it appeared to be. She was delighted to see Veronika, but it was because Veronika was a person she was fond of and not because she was her sister. Stewart admired his sister-in-law very completely. He had liked her even in Westover and in Valhalla, but for him Veronika's entire immediate family had been deplorable. This Lily of New York, sophisticated, but not in the least poseur, who knew people whom Stewart knew it was immensely valuable to know, was a delightful surprise. Her name was just beginning to be known in the theatrical world, the musical comedy in which she had the second part almost bound to have success and a presumable long run. And in all her publicity there was nothing that was not correct enough

to do her credit, no matter how she might later direct her ways.

Veronika admired Lily too. When she first saw her across the footlights in September, looking a little unreal, but completely charming, singing inconsequent lyrics in a voice that was never tired and never strained, she understood Lily's success and why it had been so rapid. Of course her grandfather's money had no doubt helped. But most of it had been due to Lily herself, so much in command of her life and yet so artistically in command, never struggling or noisy, but deft, exact, uncontentious. The convent had done that for her, coupled with her own clear desire that was never held back by worry about other people.

Veronika tried to draw her into a conference about the family.

"How do you suppose Tom is getting along?"

"Tom," said Lily, "is alternately being scolded and hugged by that girl he married."

"I wish there were something we could do for him."

"You can lend him money. But it won't get him anywhere. He was after me, of course."

"He tried to borrow money from you!"

"Of course he would!"

"What did you do?"

"I let him have five hundred, and now," finished Lily smoothly, "I won't let him have any more."

"He wants more?"

"Last week. The last time he wanted it for some sure investment which was going to make him rich in a week or so. This time he wants it to help him buy a little home—you know his precious 'love-nest.' Well, I'm not feathering it for him."

"It's horrid to think of his coming to his younger sister for money."

"Oh, I don't know about that. It's natural. I've got a little and he hasn't. But there's no use giving it to him."

"I think a lot about Valhalla."

"You waste your thoughts."

"But after all they are our own family."

"That's not to be denied. But we're grown up, you know, Ronny. We can't let ourselves be dominated by that horrible hole. You forget them. Stewart's going to do a lot and he won't be helped by that Valhalla business. Did I tell you I met Stewart's boss?"

"Where?"

"Great Neck last Sunday. He's recovering from his last divorce, you know. I rather like him."

"Did he speak of Stewart?"

"I spoke of him. Of course you don't get anything out of a person like Paul Henderson."

"I can't understand him at all. He gave a dinner for me before we went abroad, but I didn't find out anything about him. And I didn't look very well."

"I understand him," said Lily, with competence. "I like him too. I like men with poise and cool critical faces. He doesn't look his age and he's past the point when he would have begun to look it. He'll always be as he is now. Some day I shall marry a man like that. It would be fun to stir him up and how he'd take care of you!"

Veronika shuddered.

"Divorced twice—"

"Well—he treated them both very decently from all I hear. However, I agree with you that it would be

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pleasanter to have some one not quite so shopworn."

"You only pretend that you're hard."

"I'm not a bit hard. Hardness makes lines in your face. I'm not hard or cynical or anything so middle-aged. I am going to get plenty of thrills, Ronny. You haven't any corner on them."

"Thrills—" said Veronika, slowly, and looked unconsciously down at her strangely shaped figure. "I don't want thrills."

"I know. You want solidity—peace, order, heavy suburbanity."

"Something better than that."

"What then?"

"Oh, fine things," answered Veronika, "fine things—the sort of things you are getting now. But then I don't want only things. I—"

"Want the grace of God too," added Lily lightly.

"Maybe that's it."

It was hard to define, Veronika thought often, during those days when she dragged herself around and watched Lily in beautiful enjoyment of life and esthetics. It was hard to define what she felt Lily was leaving out. She did not want to see Lily harassed with worry. Often and often she had fought against that, when they were children. And yet she vaguely resented the fact that Lily would not return even in discussion to Valhalla, that she would not wear again those old intimate trials and responsibilities that had once belonged to them and were still real. Veronika could still worry about Tom. Tom was doing nothing except change from one position to another. She could even worry about her mother, whose infrequent curlicued letters came to her now and then, bearing incoherent complaints. Because

they were hers, and even her suffering was dear to her. No, Lily and Stewart would not see that.

But these were trifles. The big thing in her thoughts was the coming of her child, and in September that became distressing, for Stewart left her to go abroad again.

He had something on his mind. Veronika knew that. A certain evasiveness ran through his manner when he had something in mind that would hurt her, and Veronika, supersensitive now, recognized it. Then one day he told her.

"I've got to go to England again, Ronny."

"When?"

"At once."

"But—we can't."

"No," he said, and tried to make it rueful, "we can't. But I must."

"But you couldn't leave me now—alone here. It's only a month."

"Ronny, dear, it can't wait. Henderson wants me to go. I've got the information no one else has. I've begun the job—"

"I suppose you'd have to. But to go without me now! If one of us—it's so perilous, every way."

"You'll have every care, darling. And I'm almost sure to be back in time."

"But it's so frightening. A thing you've never gone through—"

"Do you suppose I want to leave you, darling?"

He didn't at that moment. But then later, as she heard him whistling his way through his packing, calling gayly to her that he should take this or not take that, Veronika knew that he really didn't mind leaving her.

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He made innumerable arrangements for her. They were staying in a pleasant and cool part of the city, in Gramercy Park. There was to be a car at her disposal. There was every precaution taken to make sure the doctor would be ready and the nurse was to stay with Veronika from the time of Stewart's departure. But with these things done, Stewart's feelings began to rise. He had no desire, Veronika saw, to go through that dark spiritual experience with her. No more than Lily had. She'd have to go it alone, to take all the responsibility alone, with Stewart across the ocean.

And just as he couldn't help letting his pleasure show through at being given a big job to do, at being re-intrusted with contract securing, so Veronika couldn't help nagging a little at the departure.

"You're really glad to go," she would say, so that he could deny it. He would always deny it, but each denial brought him nearer to wanting to go, secretly. And subconsciously, Veronika knew that.

Then, just at the very end, it was agony for them both. They merged in it. Stewart saw his wife, in her shapeless cape, standing at the dock with the nurse in the background and Lily, who had come down, since it was not *matinée* day, beside her. Lily was wearing cool tan linen and was so charming that it seemed to hurt Stewart to see Veronika beside her. He took his wife in his arms as something infinitely precious which he was truly grieved to leave and whispered to her with a passion of love that there was no mistaking. Because they suffered together the parting became bearable to Veronika.

She went back to her temporary home and to the enduring of a dim delicious sense of pain, the loneliness

of separation in love. For with Stewart away all the petty irritations vanished. He became distinguished. Every memory of him took on fresh colors and delight. He became exactly as she would have him, unmarred by limitations. He was fine and purposeful and devoted. Love was kinder to her so, at a distance, without any of the restraints of the body, but purely as a thing of imagination which knew no boundaries. She could live almost by letters and the days slipped by, warm days, heavy with mystery, moving slowly toward a destination of wonder.

Stewart's letters and cables broke the monotony. He lavished them on her, finding no doubt too that to adore an absent Veronika was delightfully easy. He found that success fairly came to meet him now. He wrote of the cordiality with which he was received in London, of the chance that there was to do business with the Belgian government, of people of consequence who paid him attention. Then Veronika began to look back on London itself as a former home and to weave around it the web of nostalgia which was bound to endear it to her—to think again of Mavory's flat with its long curtained windows and little iron balcony and spacious bedroom, where the coal fire glowed, of the wet smooth streets and the crypt-like church—of tea cakes at Buszards and buns sandwiched with water cress, of her first peach melba at the Carlton, of filet of sole, of the white, hospital-like rooms where she had made Red Cross dressings, of the confused storerooms where she had sorted garments for Belgian relief and of soldiers marching and Zeppelins hovering. She read the war despatches from England eagerly, for they meant more than any other news in the papers.

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Late October came and each day she thought "this may be the day," and the nurse became anxious and commonplacely facetious over the delay. Lily had little time to come to see her sister in Gramercy Park. She and not the star had made the hit of "Love Little and Long," and it multiplied her responsibilities. Besides Veronika knew Lily had small interest in the coming child. A baby was all right, but the process was not pleasant and certainly not attractive. Such things were very remote from Lily's life. She telephoned Veronika every day, and once she had news of Stewart through Mr. Henderson. She had seen Paul Henderson the night before and he had said very flattering things about Stewart.

"He asked about you too, Ronny, and wanted to know if you were perfectly well looked after."

"How decent of him."

"He had a box at the show last night."

"Lily! Is that man serious about you?"

"Oh, hardly in the home and family sense," laughed Lily. "He's an appreciative old thing. Did you know that that picture Carlotta Myers did of me is to be used on the cover of *The Drama* this month? Fancy that advertising!"

Veronika went singing from the telephone that morning. Stewart in Europe on important missions, Lily succeeding beyond every one's hopes, her child almost in the world and around her, in the expensive apartment, that order and luxury which she loved. She must certainly do something for Tom and her father, was her succeeding thought.

"Do you feel all right?" asked Miss Hastings.

"I feel wonderful."

"That's the way you always feel—just before."

"You've got that address to cable Mr. Royden?"

"I certainly have."

The nurse took out her thread and commenced her endless tatting. She was making edges for a dozen towels in these intervals of waiting. For half an hour her hook flashed in and out. Then Veronika stood before her.

"I think," she said, "I feel sort of queer."

Miss Hastings looked at her competently.

"How, Mrs. Royden?"

Veronika did not answer directly. She bent over a little.

"I ought to have my husband," she said thickly. "I ought to have my husband."

Miss Hastings laid her work aside.

"Come," she said, "he couldn't help us now, could he? We're going to be fine. Now let's see if there's another pain. That one is passing, isn't it?"

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You learn so much, thought Veronika, turning wearily on her side, in bearing children. It must be the last thing there is to know. For when you know about it you know how everything comes about. And all the people who write smart things about living are mostly men anyhow and don't know anything first hand. Only women know, who see life come out of that pain and blackness and listen to the click-click of consciousness returning through ether. All people come that way. There's power somewhere, running through the whole thing. Strongly and cruelly, but with purpose. Cruelly. To think they called it sin when you did not willingly

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accept all this torture-blurred experience that the world conspired to hem around with fictions of the rush of mother-love, of the pain so soon forgotten, of the tremendous reward. Even if you got through the pain, the injustice kept taunting you. No God who made women ever meant them to suffer like that, and again, and again, or destined their lives to be offered to such occupation and pain. In all these years why hadn't men done something about it? That was like men—agreeing with God that this was women's part. The hard part.

She shuddered away from the thought of more children, and from the obsession of being caught in a net, depressed by the fatalism which surrounded this business of child-bearing. There was the religious injunction and the easy complaisance of men and the hints one came upon everywhere that something in women did not resist. She had found it in Sophocles the other day, just before the baby was born, when she was trying to make her mind stern in the thought of the Greek women—

“In vows forsooth a woman shuns the pangs
And pains of childbirth; but the evil o'er
Once more she comes within the self-same net,
O'ercome by the strong passions of her soul.”

The threatening words stuck in her mind. She began to wonder what Stewart would say to all these thoughts. She knew. “Don't bother, darling, about a lot of rules and dictums. Take things as they come—adjust.”

And so for generations women had stumbled on—and on—bewildered—

“A nice bunch of letters—and one from England,” said Miss Hastings, coming in with them in her hand.

Veronika sat up. That was what she needed, the letters from Stewart. He was the only person who belonged to this experience except herself. His last cables and letters lay under her pillow. One of these would tell when he was returning. He might be on his way, and when he arrived she would have the baby in that pink silk bathrobe—and herself wear the new negligee—and he would rest her so. He would rest her spirit, for somehow he must understand, since it was his child too, how overwhelming it all had been.

She read. Stewart had his contracts signed. It meant money and prestige. The old foundries at Westover would begin to work overtime—money for the Roydens all of them. The ores at Valhalla would be requisitioned. It was going to please Henderson immensely. The future was limitless. Veronika read impatiently. When was he coming to the part about her and the baby and what she had gone through? She ran through his talk of business. Then—"I'm so glad you're over it all, dear, and now do take care of yourself. I'll be delayed a little longer than I thought. I've a chance to cross to France and, aside from the business importance of course, it gives me some first hand knowledge of what is happening there. Too big an opportunity to miss—Paris in war time. I'll see what gorgeousness I can buy you in Paris. Tell that nurse to keep you in bed a good long time and give my love to the kid. Love, darling—"

With her head buried in her pillow Veronika began to weep quietly. He could go to France and leave her still longer. How could he? Didn't he know how hard it had been? Didn't he know? Didn't he care? Did he think she would bear him children for such recognition!

The nurse came in and found her red-eyed. She was slightly impatient.

"Now, Mrs. Royden, you mustn't let yourself get disturbed about anything. You're still weak and we must think of the baby, you know." She sat down, determined to bring cheerfulness into the room, and began to read the newspapers.

"Look, here's a lovely picture of your sister."

Veronika looked at the rotogravure sheet. Lily's lovely face, serene and spiritual, gazed back at her, happy, seemingly faintly ironical at Veronika's distress.

"Why do you care?" she seemed to say. "Why do you let things hurt you and lose your looks?"

In the next room the baby cried, the gasping sharp cry of the infant. Every nerve in Veronika responded.

"Is the baby all right, Miss Hastings?"

"Of course. You mustn't begin to worry about her every time she cries." Miss Hastings left the room to look in the nursery and prove her point.

"You mustn't worry," said the nurse; "you mustn't care much," said Lily's picture. But if you couldn't help caring you would worry. If you were sure life was going to take care of you, as it always did of Lily, that was one thing. But if, as with you, life lay in wait always maliciously tripping you up every time you started to exult in happiness, you kept watching for traps and fearing them. You could not help but fear.

She was committed to life, as Lily was not. She had given herself to her family, to marriage and Stewart, to child-birth. When these things had you in their power they wouldn't let go, thought Veronika. You never could get away—you never wanted to get away, even from their

cruelty. But it was too hard to go on when they explained your full responsibility. Now there was the child, who had come from nowhere, and to whom she must always belong. In her weakness the relationship seemed to weigh very heavily. Desperately she wanted Stewart. She could imagine him crossing to Paris, wrapped in his great coat on the deck of some ship, talking to other passengers about the war. He would say, "Yes, I'm married. Wife's in America. I have a small daughter whom I've never seen."

Why couldn't she be like that too, then? She would write him a letter and be as casual as he. Rapidly she phrased it in her mind—

"Dear Stewart—By all means don't let any opportunity of seeing Paris go by. The baby and I are quite well—"

No, he should be made to see that his responsibility was deep, that he had somehow sinned in his absence—

Her head was hot and her thoughts simmered shrewishly.

"I wish I were dead," she said gloomily, "he wouldn't care."

Then she heard the nurse's voice on the telephone—

"Dr. Davis—I must speak to him at once—oh, doctor, Miss Hastings talking—can you come at once to the Royden baby? I don't know—all right an hour ago—respiration very fast—yes, doctor; no, doctor—"

Veronika, twelve days a mother, jumped out of bed and ran to the next room. In her beautiful bassinet, against the gay light pink of ribbons, her baby's face looked blue, and a tiny, pallid fist hit the air as she wailed. Frantically Veronika seized the infant, holding her tightly, talking wildly as if the child could understand

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the demand that she fight life and death, and in that quick instant fearful that this was judgment on her ingratitude to life and the wonder of birth and her invocation of death.

“I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it,” she kept saying fiercely.

THE THIRD BOOK

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CHAPTER I

VERONIKA hesitated outside of Thorley's. In the window were chrysanthemums, great yellow ones, beautifully curled. She saw them instantly in a corner of her drawing-room in a tall vase of black luster. Of course she could go over to Sixth Avenue and get them cheaper, but that would not be quite the same. Part of the charm was buying them here where things were redolent of luxury.

Stewart's bill here must be enormous. Still he'd think nothing of it and after all, now the armistice was signed, money should be easy. If they could make so much money in war time, peace times should mean that things would be still better.

She stood pondering the chrysanthemums for some time, for the ease of extravagance had never come to her, not even in these last years. Three years of New York and of intimate acquaintance with Lily's wardrobe had given her an air of sophistication. Her suit, bordered and collared with soft brown fox fur, was just the right length to be smart, and the plain felt cloche pulled down over her ears gave the last touch to her slim figure. She looked, like so many well-dressed women on the Avenue, about twenty years old, with her hat on. Such lines as had come in her face were well concealed.

Going in at last she ordered six chrysanthemums and was sorry then that she had spent the ten dollars. There

were other places where she could have used the money. But then, she reflected, it wasn't as if she really had the money. This was one of the bills Stewart would pay when he had a cleaning-up day and ten dollars more or less wouldn't make any difference. She wouldn't have the ten dollars in cash to use anyway and that was one of the reasons why it was easier and more comfortable to buy on Fifth instead of Sixth Avenue.

On Fifth Avenue she had charge accounts.

She was walking home, after seeing Lily's new play in *matinée*. She had been there on the opening night, of course, but it was hard to form impressions in the midst of the smiling noisy crowd of Lily's friends in the box and with necessity upon her of being nice to Mr. Henderson for Stewart's sake as well as Lily's. But this afternoon she had gone alone and watched Lily as she charmed stout suburban matrons and crowds of schoolgirls in for a week-end and travelers from the Middle West. It was a delightful play and Veronika was so glad that Lily had it—a wisp of pathos, the foam of some author's fancy, which gave Lily the chance to sing three delightful songs and reveal a delightful talent for acting, and it was due to be one of the great successes in a year when people were tired of being emotionally keyed up and wanted to be pleased. Veronika was glad that Lily was out of musical comedy. Half-naked girls still distressed her, though she had learned not to talk about the distress. This new vehicle for Lily, this bit of pathetic daintiness, was just right.

"It's charming," she had told Lily afterward, seeking her in her dressing-room and asking her to have tea somewhere. "I want to see it again and again."

"How they are falling for it!" answered Lily. "It's

the sentimentality, of course. People love to see some one get in trouble just enough so that they aren't harrowed up by it."

"You do the girl beautifully when she's at her wit's end in the second act. Even I felt sobby."

Lily laughed.

"I try to remember the way you looked on your wedding morning, when you couldn't decide whether to get married or not."

The smile went out of Veronika's eyes.

"But I didn't look like that. I was in earnest. My nose was doubtless red!"

"We amend the details," laughed Lily. "Paul Henderson calls it an exceedingly graceful performance. I asked him if he would mind letting my press agent quote him—'Steel Magnate calls Lily Pearse's performance exceedingly graceful' with a little inset picture of him in the ad. He thought for a minute I meant it."

"Stewart says that you have him where you want him."

"Is Stewart sure that he knows where I want him?"

Lily would not come to tea. She said she had a couple of people dining with her early before the play and that she must not eat too much. So Veronika had eaten alone in Maillard's and watched people and had not been especially sorry to be alone, for she had much to think about. Besides she liked to be free from any social intercourse and to watch other people have it. Then she could imagine that she was any one she wished to be, and that was still her favorite diversion. But now, as she directed her way toward Park Avenue, she was very definitely Mrs. Stewart Royden with her mind on her two children, her husband and the dinner that she and

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Stewart were giving to-morrow night. When she got as close as this to her home she was always panicky about Elinor. She had always been that way about Elinor ever since she had her infant spasms. Now, at three, she was very beautiful, but almost eerily delicate. Too full of temperament, Stewart thought, though he adored his daughter. The boy was not like that. Even at a year and a half he was a miniature Stewart, equable and sturdy.

It was a tribute to Stewart's growing fortunes that he had taken a house after his son was born.

"I'm tired of apartments," he had said. "Let's have a house," and with her interest in homes at high pitch, Veronika had sought for one. She had found one she wanted, a pink brick one at Thirty-first Street, in between two low brown stone houses, all light and remodeled, but Stewart had at the last moment had an excellent offer from a friend of his to lease a larger house just off Park Avenue.

Veronika had known when she first saw the house that it was not beautiful, but a certain grandeur, unescapably inherent in its size, had gratified her and she was impressed by the mere fact of the house. So she had given up the pink brick one at Stewart's suggestion that he thought it would be valuable for him to make a deal with the important owner of the house. As far as Veronika could see, no particular benefit had yet come from the connection and it had cost enormously to furnish the place, but Veronika took great pride in having a house in the city of apartments. That in itself was distinguished and she knew that her furnishings were distinguished too—the formal little reception room with French blue brocade on its rosewood chairs and sofa—the long

drawing-room with unpolished oak woodwork and cream silk hangings.

They had been in the house for a year, but the bill for the hangings still greeted her on the hall table. She knew it by the yellow envelope, and she did not want to open it. She had its duplicates upstairs. Stewart had assured her that he had telephoned that firm and that he had been assured unlimited credit, that the bills were an office formality. But a little depression came over Veronika as she looked at it.

Well, she'd had these panics before and Stewart always reassured her. Perhaps it was that she still wasn't tuned to the way people lived on a large scale. She picked up the evening paper and started up the staircase. She loved the staircase for its silence. In Valhalla there had been no carpet on the stairs and in Westover thin strips of ingrain carpet. These stair rugs were thick and silent. As she walked she glanced at the headlines, a habit contracted during the years of war. Now that the armistice was signed and the columns filled with peace bickerings and local tragedies she found little to interest her. Then a word struck her eye and she stopped and read and read again, her face flushing deeply.

She had heard of that competition, open to any architect, for the Globe Building. But Saul had won it! Saul whom she had not seen since her marriage. Saul whose love she still hung on to romantically when Stewart's lacked comfort. Saul had won fifty thousand dollars and an international reputation. He was in headlines. She was exalted for a moment, reading the paper importantly, then her spirit sank. He was nothing to her. She was Stewart's wife and she had taken it for granted that she moved in a world inaccessible to Saul. Then

she thought—fifty thousand dollars—what a lot of money!—and was instantly ashamed. He had offered her a hundred dollars once. Because he now commanded five hundred times as much, was there a difference in her feeling? Of course there was not.

In the nursery the children were being undressed before an open fire. It always seemed incredibly delightful to Veronika that her children undressed before this warm fire in their own lovely, light-colored room. In Valhalla she and Lily had sometimes gone down to the kitchen to dress in front of the open oven—the only warm room in the house on winter mornings. Veronika knew what warmth meant to children—warmth, light and peace—and she hugged the thought to her that her children were getting those things.

Elinor was enchanting to-night. She looked like Lily, but not as Veronika remembered Lily as a child. Lily as a child had been fearful, like the other Pearse children. But Elinor had Lily's beauty with a spirit behind it which Veronika never said was her own, but which had been kin to her since the child had begun to talk. She knew what the child was thinking, knew what things hurt her, instantly. Young Stewart was a plaything yet, a fine possession, but Elinor already made her mother suffer a little.

She took the child on her lap and sat down in a rocking-chair before the fire, cuddling her tiny slippered feet. Comfort stole through her. In this room she always loved her husband deeply as the giver of all these things, as the only one who could share the joy of them with her. Now she thought easefully of Saul. She was glad he had won that money. She hoped it would make him a great figure in the world. She and Stewart would go

on, with greater success, and some time they would all meet—Saul would see Elinor—that was Stewart coming down the hall now.

He kissed her and she got the faint odor of tobacco and liquor.

“Had a good day?” she asked.

“Seen the paper?” he countered.

“About Saul?”

“Saul who?”

“He won the prize for the Globe Building—fifty thousand.”

She passed the paper to him and he scanned it.

“Good stuff—that’s your old flame, isn’t it? Maybe you’d have done better to have taken him, Ronny.” Stewart laughed. He didn’t mean it. The competition with Saul was quite dead and he saw Veronika as very completely his wife. But Veronika, in whom the memory of the competition for her favor had revived, was annoyed. She did not answer.

Stewart put down the paper and talked over the heads of the children, who were growing clamorous.

“I wasn’t thinking of that news. It’s more important. Henderson’s got pneumonia.”

“No—” She read the creased paragraph he pointed out. Henderson was the background of their living. “How dreadful! Did you see him?”

“No—nobody allowed. I shall try again in an hour or so.”

They checked their further comment because of the nurse and gave all their attention to the children. The children and the firelight—the closed door made them both feel secure and happy for the moment. But all through dinner Stewart’s face was grave. He had his

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mind on Henderson, his friend, and on the meaning of Henderson in his life as well. Veronika knew.

"Of course he won't die," she encouraged him.

"You can't tell about pneumonia."

"It's awful, isn't it—but—if he should, what would it mean, aside from the personal grief?"

"There'd be hell to pay."

"Wouldn't things just go on?"

"Things would—but would I? I'm Henderson's man and the rest of the crowd are gunning for me just because I am. I'd have to fight for my life especially with the European contracts nullified by the armistice."

"Are they?" she asked, horrified.

"Repudiated the whole bunch."

"But they can't!"

"Can't they? They can tie those things up with litigation for so long that we'd be damned glad to get out of it, taking our loss."

Veronika was silenced. She had learned to translate success into periods of expenditure, to translate reverses into terms of bills unpaid, and absorption on Stewart's part.

"Isn't Mr. Dunn a friend of yours?"

"Dunn doesn't approve of any one who takes a drink."

"Then why take it?"

"We needn't go into that, need we?" asked Stewart coldly.

They relapsed into a rather chill silence.

"I don't think Lily knows. She was laughing about Mr. Henderson this afternoon."

"Damn it all. Why didn't Lily marry him a month ago?"

"Why should Lily marry him if she doesn't want to?"

Veronika despised this cementing of a business situation with Lily's relation to Henderson. It had come about naturally enough to be sure. Henderson was devoted to Lily, more deeply so than he had ever been to any one, so Veronika had been told. Still to use that as a reason for being sure of Henderson's backing was humiliating.

"You don't seem to be worrying much about poor Henderson personally."

Stewart looked at her angrily.

"I am," he said shortly. "I'm immeasurably distressed. But Henderson is more than a life. He's a business structure. He's my life too. In a couple of years I could play it alone. But now—oh, my God, why didn't he trust me a little further? Why didn't he give me some real power?"

He pushed his chair back and went into the drawing-room, lighting a cigarette nervously. Veronika followed. She felt intolerably idle. There was nothing she could do. She was not really disturbed about Henderson, but she hated to see Stewart get so nervous and excited. He had been drinking that afternoon. It showed in his excitability. He was often like that lately. It shook her faith. Stewart was the anchor of the family. If he was useless, what could they do with all this luxury which surrounded them like so much strangeness? Stewart had to be in control.

She had meant to take up the matter of the payment for the hangings to-night.

Now how could she?

She tried to change the current of his thought.

"Lily's play is good. I saw it again to-day. It wears well."

"Did you?" He tried to meet her comment and from the difficulty of the attempt she guessed at the seriousness of his situation.

"I wish I could help!" she cried.

He didn't want that kind of emotional sharing.

"Now leave it to me, it will be all right," he put her off hastily.

He measured the room with his slow walking up and down. She didn't want to sit looking at him and left him alone. She had learned to do that now. She had learned so much about Stewart. She had known him as a patient admirer and a determined lover, she had found him as a husband and then, gradually, she had discovered that she had to live with a man to whom being an admirer and lover and husband were only side issues much of the time. She had to find out about Stewart Royden, who was Henderson's confidential man and who was changing from being a promising, deferential, young fellow into an ambitious financier, who had friends and enemies. These things made life very busy and complex.

She too was distressed by Henderson's pneumonia. Fear of catastrophe came over her and she felt that the housemaid, turning down the bed in her room and adjusting satin coverlets, knew all about it. The luxury of her house frightened her and angered her with Stewart. It was no use having luxury if you couldn't make it real, if it had to be founded on such shifting sand that the death of your patron made the whole structure fall. She thought, I married Stewart so that things would be more stable.

But all the time, as she analyzed him a little more pitilessly than she could have done several years before,

she was hurt because he was pacing up and down in the drawing-room and was threatened. He shouldn't worry so. They'd had several bad things happen lately, but after all luck had to turn. Luck would turn, probably just the next day. She went downstairs again and sat down on the arm of Stewart's chair.

"Look here, Stewart, whatever it is, let's just meet it. There can't be anything so very dreadful except that I'm sorry for poor Mr. Henderson alone, ill, without any wife or children. You've done wonderfully and you can find a way out, I'm sure."

Stewart laid his head on her breast.

"You're right, dear. You're always right, and good."

He relaxed a little and Veronika took soft pride in it. Deftly she took up the responsibility as Stewart laid it down, and planned how to best set things in order if Henderson did die and they had to retrench greatly. She wished she hadn't ordered those chrysanthemums.

CHAPTER II

I

PAUL HENDERSON had died. The newspapers carrying feature stories were scattered now, two months ago. His will had been probated, a magnificent will made some four years before, taking just account of every one to whom he was or had been related, taking care of charities of which he had been a patron, a fair, wise and sane will. As Stewart said bitterly once, the money might have all been Lily's. But it was not Lily's, who, after all, did not need it—nor was any of it Stewart's. His own relation to Henderson, a patronage based on current favors, had become utterly worthless except as it had gained him certain entries which he must now fight to maintain. Stewart was ready to fight. Only Veronika noticed the threads of gray that came into his hair. The rest of his business and personal associates saw him only as a little graver since Henderson had died, but holding his head up and assuming that his relations with Consolidated Steel would be the same as before.

Henderson's death had come at an ugly time. With the repudiation of the steel contracts by the warring countries, and the difficulty of pressing claims while the whole world was rejoicing in cessation of war and the foreign nations could put off any claims on the plea of readjustment first, Stewart's great service, the getting of the contracts, had become nullified. It could not be denied that he had shown skill, but there was no longer any tan-

gible result to show. A period of suspension had come over most industries and every one waited to see what the times would be like. Stewart's extremely large salary as head of the export division began to be questioned. That salary had, during the war, been swelled by bonuses and by percentages on contracts. It was all stopped. That could have been weathered if there had been no division of feeling in regard to Stewart. But he had come upon the scene suddenly, and been too well paid. David Dunn, new head of the board of directors and a tremendous purist, did not like Stewart. In Dunn's mind Stewart belonged distinctly to the rather deplorable side of Henderson's private life. He had heard that Henderson wanted to marry Stewart's sister-in-law, an actress. That stamped the relationship. Stewart played as deftly as he could, during these days, the old and sound Westover connection, but it was late. David Dunn had a mind as inflexible as his steel products, and once he had been offered a drink in Stewart's office. Stewart, whose spirits had been high that day, had forgotten Mr. Dunn's large contribution to the Anti-Alcohol Fund.

Dunn humiliated Stewart. He saw that his salary was cut, which was perhaps justifiable because of the deflation of business. But he sent Clarkson, his personal attorney, abroad to negotiate the matter of the contracts which had been broken, and Stewart was left in New York, infuriated because he knew that he could pull more out of the wreck than Clarkson could, and also because the thing approximated an insult which he did not dare resent publicly. He did talk to people about it and found them sympathetic and willing enough to tell him that nobody could work with Dunn who was an old tyrant and stubborn. But beyond sympathy nobody seemed to have

much to offer. The wise men of prominence whom he knew were already conscious of a great period of retrenchment which must come, of a bad autumn and a confused winter ahead in Wall Street and they knew they must get together on a single cry of normalcy and economy.

Stewart's rise had been coincident with the war. So it met with much distrust. Henderson no longer lived to endorse his notes or to extend a personal loan if necessary. He could expect no favors from the Henderson estate. For the first time in a year Stewart began to withdraw his eyes from a future that was brilliant and take stock of his present position. He, who had been well-to-do in Westover, had been living in New York on a scale which presupposed an income three times what his was, even before his salary had been cut. He knew there were people waiting to see what he would do. He knew that he had been picked for slaughter.

All this sifted through the walls of the house off Park Avenue—not in a day or a week, but over a period of a couple of months. The question of ready money stood like a ghost between Veronika and her husband. Always he knew that she wanted to ask him for it and always she knew that he wanted her not to ask.

After a few months there came a better period.

Stewart came home one night in his old insouciant way. He tossed the baby and told Elinor stories and caressed his wife as if he was not afraid to kiss her. Under her plate at dinner she found a folded blue slip. It was a check for two thousand dollars.

"Stewart—how can you afford it?"

"Oh, that's all right," he said, "things are looking up. They aren't going to be nearly as bad as I thought. Pay

the servants and your more pressing bills. Don't pay everything you've got owing, of course. Just the long-standing ones."

To pay those long-standing ones gave her such a great sense of solvency that she was exalted. She felt quite at peace with the world and tremendously in love with Stewart, who could so handle finance and protect his family. It was a long lane that had no turning. She thought that if you only waited your luck was bound to turn sooner or later. Everything would be all right. She even took fifty dollars out of the thousand and put in a savings bank account to show her complete solvency. Her house became doubly beautiful when Stewart told her that he had paid the accrued rent. She came into fresh possession of it.

In those days so much of the temper of their married life was utterly dependent on Stewart's financing. It came now and then to Veronika's mind that they were happy or not according to Stewart's check book and that shocked her. But it was not always when they were sure that they could cover the month's expenses that they were closest. There were days of black depression and nights when Stewart did not sleep well and turned to Veronika sometimes like a fretful child for comfort. She learned how to give comfort too with her grave generalizations about living, her quaint blend of philosophy and superstition and religion which helped to pass the hours of worry.

She became wise about Stewart's temperament, about his failures and the reasons for his failures. But mostly life revolved about money. If there had been money on this or that occasion, so much could be accomplished. There were so many pitfalls of extravagance into which

one fell by not having money enough to be economical, for economy presupposed money on hand and Stewart and Veronika dealt largely with credit. It was a hard game to play and there were times when Veronika could not quite see why it was so difficult to play a simpler one.

Possibly it was partly because of Stewart's pride, but also it was because he saw that his only chance consisted in not letting the people who were already waiting to smile at his bankruptcy see it. He knew things must change. It was a phenomenally bad winter. If they could get through the next few weeks—it was always the immediate period which seemed the worst.

From the midst of her own world, in which even her social activity was founded on financial strategy, Veronika had glimpses of Lily's so different one. Lily was absorbed, but very decent in those days. If she had known people who could have helped Stewart she would have made use of them, but her circle that winter was not one which included any one like Paul Henderson. She was "playing with young ones," she said. She made a point of asking Veronika to such parties as she thought would be amusing, and it was at one of these given by a smart collector of celebrities that Veronika met Saul.

Her first feeling, when she saw him in the room which she and Lily were entering, was that he had not changed at all. She had expected prosperity to make more impression on him, but he looked as he always looked, long and lank and carelessly dressed. So unchanged was he that Veronika wished that she too looked the same and did not show any marks of life.

Some one tried to introduce her.

"I know Mrs. Royden," said Saul quietly. "How are you, Ronny?"

"How do I look?"

"A faint smugness of prosperity," he told her.

The old Saul had not talked like that. She countered smartly and hated her crisp, semi-humorous, little sentences.

"My wife's here," said Saul. "I'd like you to meet her."

Veronika had not known he was married. He brought up a slender woman, older than Veronika, whose face was marked by sharp clarity and honesty.

"This is Mary Bennett—my wife."

One of those women who kept their own names.

Mary Bennett looked Veronika over. It was clear that she knew instantly what Veronika had been to Saul and measured her fitness to have been so much. Saul had probably told her. "She wouldn't marry me—married money."

That was how she appeared against the plain tailored dress of Mary Bennett—as if she had married money. Her fur coat, Stewart's gift of a year ago, was redolent of luxury—her velvet dress.

"Yes," repeated Saul, teasingly, "prosperity's made you a little smug."

"But you're prosperous too."

"I—oh, no. Mary and I have to live on that award all our lives. I never want to earn any more."

He was honest. He didn't want to be rich and neither did his Mary Bennett. She was jealous of Mary Bennett, not because she was married to Saul, but because she and Stewart harassed themselves and these two didn't. Of course they had no children.

They talked for half an hour, and she knew that her talk reeked of the kind of thing she didn't want to appear

—the smart New Yorker's life just as her looks were that of the smart New Yorker. Saul discounted such people entirely. If he had not forgotten that he had ever held her in his arms he certainly had lost all desire to do so again. That made her lonely, as if something precious which she had treasured had been taken out of its careful wrappings and fallen to pieces before her eyes. The strange thing was that they both admired Lily. They liked Lily's play. They felt that Lily's beauty and Lily's charm and ability commanded respect. Veronika guessed that Mary Bennett could have understood it if her husband had cared for Lily, but that she could not understand his past feeling for Veronika. She caught the whimsical, not-at-all jealous look Saul's wife gave her.

It seemed all wrong. When she got home she planned a theater party with Stewart alone, for it was an evening without engagements. But she found a message from Stewart that he would not be home for dinner. That meant, she knew, that he was probably dining with some men and that there would be too much liquor. It wasn't as if Stewart was a drunkard. But she hated having to deal with moods that were half-alcoholic and therefore unreal.

She let Elinor dine with her in order to put uncomfortable thoughts out of her head. Elinor's bright head above her scarlet wool dress was lovely to look at and her little ripples of thought danced over Veronika's dark mood. Elinor adored her mother and she had the gift of demonstration. As she talked Veronika dreamed of the life she would live with Elinor and make for Elinor and little Stewart, keeping everything beautiful and orderly. She banked those thoughts up as a barricade against the fear that this wife of Saul's was handling life

better than she herself was. When this harassing winter was over, doubtless she would have her chance.

Thoughts of Saul and Mary Bennett and Lily kept pressing on her mind. She could not lay the thought of them away because she did not know where to put it. It was hard to understand why they seemed to live lives so much less troublous than hers. Her very caring to live well seemed to block her, her relentless effort to take pleasure in frustration. When she tried to work out her respect for her life and for the lives of her children in practical values she appeared a silly ambitious woman trying to live on a scale too expensive for her husband. For Lily attainments synchronized with her dreams. But never so with Veronika. Always the attainment was a caricature of the dream.

Her God was still a giver, whether it was giver of money or love or peace or virtue and he seemed to fail her very often.

She put Elinor to bed herself, sending the nurse away, and tried to find peace in the soft warmth of the life of her child. But Elinor drifted off to sleep and with sleep her soul and mind became remote from her mother's. Shivering, Veronika went down to the library and to her desk, trying to find interest in invitations, in the game of securing and giving invitations which she was learning to play. Invitations and bills—her desk was piled with them and they meant, she knew, the same thing. They revolved around money, and the whole of the social life she saw was based on money, or on erotic impulses, which was worse.

Stewart would come after a while, with a mind slightly fuddled that couldn't help her. But she wanted him to come, for she knew that he loved her, in his fashion, and

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without him now there seemed no reason for anything. His battle was hers and she must fight it. She was a master hand at keeping the semblance of order and that was what he wanted now. At least it was that which Veronika thought was his need.

2

The New Year came, New Year's day itself, that glorious chance for division in kinds of fortune, for breaking the chain of incidents which held one to unpleasant memories. Veronika went to church on New Year's morning and following the service absently, blocked out her plan before the Lord. She would do what was best and what was fitting and she expected in return certain benefits, those of happiness and a modicum of success. And health, she added, but not with unction, for after all health had never been denied her and sickness was a trouble with which the Pearses held little combat.

Stewart and she had been at a gay party the night before, a watch night of dancing, and, after having gone to several dull hotel and cabaret entertainments, dull because of the lack of variety in amusement and the obviousness of the secret drinking, the last hours had been spent in a house where the drinking was not at all secret and the talk increasingly loose. It had been a party given by a man whom Stewart was cultivating at the moment, a young man of fortune—with the unwholesome canniness of the miserly rich. Veronika suspected him of not playing fair with Stewart and she was unhappy because in the course of their amusement-seeking Stewart had spent a great deal of money. Despite the fact that they had gone to bed very late she was up early, for she

wanted to break away from the extravagant evening, to start the New Year right and wholesomely and there rang in her head her mother's adage that "whatever you do on the first day of the year you'll be doing all year."

Veronika marked that New Year's day as a symbol. For Stewart felt the zest of the imaginary new chance with her. He had come to share a little in those dreams of hers—he needed their sustenance. He bought her a corsage of violets and carried it home himself. In the afternoon she wore it with her latest costume which was unpaid for of course, but had come from an expensive house which was used to patrons who kept it waiting for payment. They left their car at home and walked as they made calls on some of their friends. Every one seemed so glad to see them that their spirits mounted high. Stewart was his old easy and companionable self that afternoon, with the shrewd intensity relaxed in his face, and Veronika was so full of eagerness to please that the self-consciousness which always checked her approaches, dwindled to nothing.

Several of their friends were entertaining and in some of the houses orchestras were already playing for dancing. But Veronika and Stewart did not stay long anywhere.

"Why don't we call on the Dunns?" asked Veronika, ardent in her search for symbols of stability.

"That's an idea," said Stewart, "why don't we? Let's give them the shock of their lives. You've met his wife?"

"Yes—she asked me to come to see her some day."

The Dunns lived in an unfashionable district in a house with a tall iron fence around it.

"Symbolic fence," said Stewart, grinning.

Both he and Veronika were slightly embarrassed, but

the Dunns were home and glad to see them, clearly pleased that these young people sought them out on New Year's day. They were received in a long room with calf skin "sets" of law books on the lower shelves of the bookcases and Scott and Dickens and Thackeray up above them. Mrs. Dunn, grave, high-collared, stiff with resistance to the unpleasant manners of an age she disliked, and from presiding over charitable committees, was gracious and her husband did not seem formidable to Veronika. He was a little man with a disproportionately imposing head and shoulders, slightly pompous. Watching him Veronika understood how the easy grace of Paul Henderson, so handsome and charming even in late middle age, must have irritated Dunn. Dunn had no grace. His manners labored a little. Stewart was not his kind of person. Veronika could see that and see why Stewart's problem was difficult.

"Three children?" asked Mrs. Dunn.

"Two," smiled Veronika.

"Don't you find New York a difficult place to bring them up?"

"I feel very incapable of bringing them up at all," laughed Veronika.

"You should not," said Mrs. Dunn. "A good mother and simple surroundings are all that children need. A good mother who teaches them the fear of the Lord."

It was on the tip of Veronika's tongue to say that she did not want them to fear the Lord, but she repressed that and looked acquiescent. Stewart who neither feared the Lord nor tried to use Him changed the subject. At least so he tried. But Mr. Dunn could not be swerved. He swung into discourse on what he called "this day and age." He spoke of approaching financial stringency, of

the way the country would be obliged to return to a period of economy and rigid thinking—that nothing else could save the country. He told with some unction of the failure of a great motion picture concern which could not get its bankers to carry it any longer.

“But doesn’t that put a lot of people out of work?” asked Veronika.

“They will find more useful employment perhaps,” said Mr. Dunn.

Stewart nodded, in consonance with the solemn head-wagging of his host.

“Terrific waste in that industry.”

“Exorbitant prices paid for the spread of indecency,” said Mrs. Dunn. She was, she told Veronika, on a Committee for the Establishment of a Rigid Censorship and the Promulgation of Educational Films. The title came without humor from her.

But that passed. The Dunns having testified to their morality, grew more expansive. They talked of their pleasure and of their home in California, where they went after Christmas when Mr. Dunn was free. Veronika had a vision of a smugly sunny place where the Dunns wintered in stiff white clothes.

A maid brought tea and lit the electric lamps.

“I must go home to my children before they’re asleep,” said Veronika rising.

The Dunns liked that. They both smiled at her and suddenly looked like a lonely old man and woman. Veronika shook hands with them rather warmly.

“Poor old things,” she said to Stewart, when they were walking toward their house again.

“Poor old millions,” said Stewart. “Nice person to work with, isn’t he?”

"But simple," said Veronika—"just a rich old bigot."

"Well, it was a good thing to do, to call on him anyway," Stewart went on; "they liked it."

"Of course."

"You're lots of help, Ronny, dear."

Her hand went out from her furred cuff to rest on his arm.

"I try."

They went along through the dusky evening. The streets, aglow with motors, the towering beauty of the buildings, all thrilled Veronika. She felt closer to Stewart than she had felt in months, and it was good to be close in the midst of this beauty. For the hour the world belonged to her and Stewart. There was satisfied endeavor after that call on the Dunns and there was spirit and glory in this dusky New Year's night. Everything would come right. At home the children would be waiting for them. They talked of their plans and felt vastly superior to the Dunns. Stewart felt sure that the New Year was going to bring him prosperity. All he asked, he told Veronika, was a fighting chance. He told her something of the forces that were arrayed against him, not too much, for Veronika did not understand the terms of business when they grew technical. Dunn would have to turn to him, for he needed Stewart's type of mind. "I'm only thirty-eight, Ronny, dear. That's pretty young for a fellow to make good in New York. Lots of them have lost two or three fortunes and made them again before they are fifty and finally get on their feet."

"So I have to give you twelve years?" she laughed.

"Not that long. Two years and I'll bring you the earth in tissue paper." She knew that there was rising in him that feeling which had been deadened lately by

worry, delight in giving her things and making her happy. It was the outlet for his love and she never disparaged it, recognizing it as something very fine. As they entered the hall he drew her to him in a long, passionate embrace. Veronika, who so loved order in all things, felt that this was fitting and let her spirit soar. Never had the children been so entrancing as they went to see them that night. Veronika's eyes sought her husband's to be sure he realized the delicious magic of the fact that these children existed and were their own. Beautiful bodies—beautiful souls.

The cook was out and Veronika herself got the supper. That too was delightful. There was a whole jellied chicken in the porcelain ice-box. She mixed salad in a wonderful Chinese bowl which she had found in a china shop one day. There were wine-colored jellies and preserved fruit and cake with deep, soft frosting. Veronika, who had never lost her Valhalla delight in eating and was still nearly always hungry, savored her spirit through her appetite too. And Stewart laughed at her and in the candle light they were very gay and very close.

They were amazingly happy and proud of each other, confident of their power over the next day and the new year. But when at last Stewart had fallen asleep, Veronika lay awake a little, hanging on to her happiness as if she feared that while she slept it might steal away.

CHAPTER III

I

LILY scrutinized the clothes hanging in orderly array in an open wardrobe trunk.

"If this trunk is to be the one that goes in my cabin, put in the black satin dinner dress, Julie. It's in the other room. Look it over for fastenings."

Veronika protested as the maid left the room.

"You've enough clothes for a month in that cabin trunk."

"Ah, but I shan't wear them probably. I've practically decided to wear the black satin every night for dinner. It's much more clever to be seen in one thing night after night than to dress up like a Chicago lady going abroad for the first time."

"But you are going abroad for the first time."

"That's no reason for looking like it."

Veronika looked at the furred cloaks, the tweed dresses, the soft, small, veiled hats around her.

"How much of your life is dependent on clothes!" she said.

"My form of expression," said Lily, "just as yours used to be kitchen sinks in Valhalla and now is Lenox service plates—"

"That's not my form of expression."

"Well, you seem to be sacrificing a good deal to keep them."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing special. You yourself were glooming about expenses, and Stewart does look a wreck all right."

"That's not my fault," said Veronika curtly.

"If men get down, they can't resist a jolly bootlegger," suggested Lily.

"I don't know what you mean. Anyway, my mind is not on service plates, Lenox or crockery. I've more than that to think about."

Lily looked her sister over. Veronika was not at her best. Her eyes were tired and she was not made up at all.

"You are having a tough time, aren't you? The worst of it is that Stewart is really so clever. But just now you need a shampoo, a marcel, a manicure and a facial. Then you can meet life—"

"Oh, don't be silly. I don't think I can bear it." Veronika stood up. "I didn't come in to keen about myself, but to see if I could help you. But I can't. It's going to be an awfully successful tour I suppose."

"London engagement. Mustn't call it a tour. I've a good press agent and I see no reason why it shouldn't be successful. The English are crazy over American comedies this year."

"And is Lyon Duxbury going to follow you?"

"As he pleases. But he must not bother me. I'll be far too busy to play with boys."

"Even boys so rich."

"Even so."

"What are you looking for, Lily?"

"I don't know that I'd tell if I knew," laughed Lily.

"We've none of us been very successful except you. The last letter I had from father sounded so broken. He's getting old."

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"My dear girl, he would, you know. You can't stop that—"

"And Michael—did I tell you he came to Stewart one day to ask for a loan?"

Lily checked Veronika's gloom with a gesture.

"Don't go over the lot. Isn't there something I can do for you, Ronny? Would a couple of thousand help?"

"No, thanks. You're going to get that other back soon. I wanted to give it to you before you sailed, but somehow there has been such a lot of expense—"

"Do forget about it. I wish you'd take a check, Ronny. Don't be so self-conscious. Everybody's broke this year."

"I don't intend to have my family supported by my sister," said Ronny coldly. "It's not the way things should be."

"Will you ever learn the difference between the way things are and the way they should be?"

Lily spoke lightly enough, but her eyes were shrewd. She was a mirror of poise and control which showed Veronika as lacking both these qualities. Obviously, just as she was willing to help Veronika she did not intend to suffer with her. Or perhaps, having no habit of suffering, she found it impossible.

"What do you mean?"

"Why keep on pretending to yourself that it's a good old world?" Lily went on, still with that lightness which made her remarks almost irrelevant. "It's a mean, cut-throat world. But it's tractable. You can manage it if you don't idealize it. If you idealize it, it bluffs you along and knifes you when it gets the chance."

"And where's God?"

"Don't ask me." Lily was in a little beyond her depth

and resented it. "Look here, old girl, cheer up. And by the way, if you won't let me help you out just now you can do one thing. Send a little check along to Valhalla for me. I hate to write letters."

Veronika nodded. She watched Lily scratching off the check and wondered at that impassive generosity. If Lily didn't have enough to keep herself as she wanted to be kept, she wouldn't do it. But she had a surplus and disposed of it unemotionally. It was partly that which made it impossible for Veronika to take money from her.

She said good-by. The maid had come back with the black dress and Lily was rapidly becoming preoccupied. But she put a lovely arm along Veronika's shoulders and went to the door with her.

"Take it easy, old girl," she said, "and remember that Stewart needs a lot of praising and bolstering up. All men do. And of course if he should turn out to be a pretty hopeless proposition I don't think I'd stick at it forever. With your religious feelings, of course a separation is possible."

"It's not so simple."

"No—I suppose not."

They were to be separated for at least six months, for Lily's comedy was to go to London for an indefinite run and had been promised great success there. Lily's departure, a practical business, managed by her press agent, a thing of photographs and just the right interviews, would allow no time for intimate leave-takings. Veronika knew that she would be there with the children to give just the right touch of chaperonage, but her appearance too would be almost public.

"Don't bother about my affairs," she told Lily, though that was, as she knew, a formality. "Take care of your-

self. And, Lily, I think you haven't touched bottom yet."

"It's tops that interest me," laughed Lily.

It was time for Veronika to go home. She was afraid of her house these days. In the midst of their financial difficulties it seemed not to belong to her any more. It was the habitat of unpaid bills and worries and skirmishes about money. It was everything that a home should not be and little that it should, except as the children, unconscious that the place was spiritless, gave it life. Stewart avoided the house as much as he could. It was his blunder—on his hands for five months more, unrentable because of its size. Veronika never remarked, but they both knew, that the pink brick one she had liked would never have been as harassing a problem.

It was almost better when Stewart was not at home these days, for Veronika again found it very hard to be gentle with him. He was cornered now by obligations, by lack of support from other men, by opposition. The situation had been serious at the New Year and the hope of New Year's day only mirage. Now, in April it was approaching disaster. Veronika had felt always in the back of her mind that if things got too bad they could go back to Westover and live on the income from the foundry, Stewart's first source of fortune. It had come to her as a hideous shock when she had been told that he had sold that months ago to some outsiders and that the money, that first two thousand he gave her, had been part of the proceeds. With the rest he had elaborately planned a coup in Wall Street and had lost it all. Now he was temporarily without resources and she was forced to witness the most amazing thing a woman can witness: the secret lacks of her husband coming to the surface of

his action. She had known him first as rather worldly in contrast with her own unsophistication—then as protective, as shrewd and hard. Now there was marshaled before her reluctant eyes the weaknesses she had not known to exist. The world, Stewart felt, owed him a living and he'd been damnably treated. He had been out of luck beginning with Henderson's death. No one gave him a hearing. He had little of that feeling which was instinctive in Veronika, to keep up, to bear up under all and every circumstance and to fight hardest of all in disaster. He was trying to find a way out, of course, but he was resentful. He was beginning to admit defeat.

Veronika could no longer bolster him up with love. All coquettishness had long since disappeared from her. She was devoted to his interests, but she was doubtful of him and he knew it. It hardened him against her.

Yesterday Veronika had made one of those quiet, nerve-racking trips to her doctor's office. For an hour she had sat in his waiting-room, her whole being alive with her question, wondering what the answer would be. She was worried at the thought of having to face another child-bearing. The birth itself no longer disturbed her, but the incapacity that went with the nine months, the lack of full energy when she was going to need it, and the expense were dreadful thoughts. She was bitter as she watched the women who like herself sat there in that crowded waiting-room, each one with a question on her face. Terrible faces, those which surrounded her. Out of them bravery and resistance had temporarily gone. No one knew any one else. There was no necessity for keeping up a bright face here and each woman seemed to have relaxed into her weary, secret thoughts until her face sagged. Tired women, they were—frightened

women, most of them suffering because they were women, for this physician specialized in their diseases. This was the story that people did not care to read—this dénouement of so many lives in doctor's offices—of beaten, worn bodies, dragging themselves there to hear judgment. So many of them did not look well-to-do, which was surprising, for the doctor was a very expensive doctor indeed. Veronika judged that many of them had come as a last resort after having tried to fight their ailments alone. Fear sat heavily on the room—fear and worry.

It was humiliating. Worse than humiliating, somehow treacherous to those children at home, that she herself should be here. She was no girl, terrified of her first childbirth. She knew now, knew that the game was worth the candle, knew that cruel as birth was, the children unconsciously tried to atone for its cruelty with their softness and the pathos of their helplessness. And they succeeded. As she had come to watch the lives of other people, and become more capable of understanding them, as she knew more of the struggles of human maturity, her resentment against child-bearing had gone. It was the best thing most women had. She saw them deny it, saw them running around on the streets, in the shops, in drawing-rooms, denying it, hunting for something more comfortable, more satisfactory, and, most of them, failing. Everywhere in New York were empty faces, faces which had denied themselves a look into the depths of pain and mystery or, having looked, had turned fearfully away, to spend much of their lives in the devastating fear that they might have to look again.

Veronika had no sympathy for women now because they were exposed to motherhood. But she had come to see the tangle of principle and livelihood, the conflict of

feeling and income which confused most women, the stout, practical barriers which so often blocked fine and spiritual impulse. And there was no companionship possible in these matters. Each woman had to go her way home.

Stewart had said—

“That would be an awful mess just now, wouldn’t it?”

His eyes hadn’t even met hers.

“Seen a doctor?”

“No.”

“Better do that at once.”

“You are bothered. I shouldn’t have told you.”

“Only for you, dear. With things as they are we don’t want any further complications.”

“Complications” he called it. In another circle they spoke of “another mouth to feed.” It meant the same thing.

She was not even to be allowed to bear her children with her head up, she thought desolately. This sneaking around to doctors’ offices in the hope that she wouldn’t hear him verify the fear that should not be fear, was her part.

He had thought she was “all right.” She resented the phrase as she had the uncertainty.

It put her in a class of women whom she despised.

When you resented things, judgments were dangerous. Still, while she went secretly to doctors’ offices, it seemed unjust that Stewart should not forswear his bootlegger.

Her beautiful hall seemed cold and dreary.

“Where are the children, Ella?”

The nursemaid, not a capable one any longer, passed her on her way upstairs.

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"Elinor is coughing, Mrs. Royden."

"Elinor?"

"She didn't eat her lunch. She doesn't seem quite herself."

The house was cold. The coal shortage had made itself apparent by this time, and they bought what they could and used electric heaters.

"Did you keep her out too long?"

"We went to the park and back."

"She should never be kept out when she doesn't seem well at noon."

Veronika went to the nursery. Elinor was cutting papers, her face flushed and her eyes a little red.

"Don't you feel well, darling?"

"Yes, mother."

That was Elinor. She never would admit trouble. If she broke a toy she tried to mend it. But she was ill. Her mother felt that sharp, choking rise of anxiety that always came over her when Elinor was sick, like the memory of that terrible first convulsion when the baby was twelve days old and Stewart was in England. Stewart never worried over Elinor as she did. But he had not seen that. He had told Veronika that she made Elinor delicate with fussing over her.

Only a child's cold. She wouldn't call the doctor to-night. Ten dollars a call just now unless it was necessary seemed wicked expenditure. She would probably be all right to-morrow.

Stewart came in later. He seemed a little more spirited than usual, but Veronika had learned to discount that. Even now Stewart kept on with his trick of having rich days and poor days. Now he had successful days and unsuccessful ones, but often he considered a day success-

ful when some one had given him vague encouragement and possibly a drink. Things were at a bad pass between him and Dunn. Stewart's position was abolished. Because he was a member of the board of directors of several of Dunn's subsidiary companies he could not be ousted completely, but he knew that his standing was gone almost everywhere. He kept threatening to make new affiliations, to found his own companies, and little came of it but threats which bothered no one.

"Elinor's not well," Veronika greeted him.

"Child's cold, I suppose."

She refused to admit that, being melancholy, though secretly that was what she thought.

"Look at her, will you?"

"Right away."

"What's her temperature?"

"Only ninety-nine."

"Let's take it again," suggested Stewart.

It had gone up.

"Call the doctor, Ronny, why don't you?"

"Ten dollars, you know."

"I don't think that matters."

Her lip curled. "Not even if you haven't the ten? We might take her to a dispensary."

How she hurt him! His face was livid as he turned to her.

"Call Dr. Merrian."

She hesitated. "I think some compresses—"

Stewart went to the telephone himself.

When the doctor came Elinor seemed worse. She was still not plaintive about it, but her talk, her restlessness showed her fever. She looked very fragile to her mother

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with that dangerous color in her cheeks and her slim little arms outlined under the coverlet.

The doctor looked at Veronika, as they left the child's room.

"I think I'd get a nurse, Mrs. Royden."

"Is she as ill as that?"

"She's not very ill—yet. But there's never any telling about influenza. You have to watch it night and day. And Elinor hasn't reached the peak of the trouble yet."

Veronika put her hand to her moist forehead.

"I'll get Miss Hastings."

Miss Hastings, who had helped to bring Elinor into the world, came a few hours later. Veronika's panic was rising, but Miss Hastings took calm control of the child and Elinor fell asleep. Never had she looked more precious to her mother than during that first respite of sleep. It was not her beauty nor her grace, nor even her affection, but that spirit which Veronika had somehow created and knew she was responsible for. Elinor loved every moment of living. From the contrast of her own experience her mother had known how to make life delightful.

"We must keep the house quiet," said Miss Hastings, "it's complete rest that does the trick."

"You don't think there's danger?"

"Oh, no. There's never danger if you get a flu case in time and keep watching it."

She seemed to be right. The doctor found Elinor somewhat better after two days. The fever had left her almost eerie. It excited her mind, and she talked endlessly. Veronika bought her some yellow primroses and they stood on the beautifully clean little table beside her bed, with the game Stewart had bought and which she

was to play when she was well again. In the nursery the baby who was kept away from her and who was old enough to miss her, called for her in his stumbling baby's talk. The illness seemed to make the house pleasanter. Woes dropped away. Veronika refused to let her mind dwell on anything except Elinor. Stewart had promised her on the first night that he would somehow take care of the expense, and he had said it in his old vigorous way.

"You're not to worry, darling. She is to have every possible care. Influenza is too tricky to be played with. And take care of yourself while you're with her. You must keep your own strength up."

It was beautiful to be cared for like that.

There were other lovely things. One night Elinor showed her first signs of appetite and Veronika brought up the tray herself—the tray with Mother Goose legends on it and one of Elinor's own red napkins and the pewter bowl of milk toast. They made a game out of eating it.

"When will I be well?"

"Next week, darling."

"And then can I get up? Because there are lots of things in my mind to do."

The warm room—Elinor with all the pretty symbols of childhood about her, and a smile on her thin face—with her bathrobe of blue eiderdown around her shoulders, talking and then slipping a little farther down on her pillows with "I guess I'll rest, mother."

"That's right, precious."

She slept after that. There were a hundred little things about it all that Veronika never forgot, gracious little actions and looks to turn soon to instruments of torture.

Veronika had fallen asleep when Miss Hastings, a

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strange wild figure in her kimono with great purple birds, came suddenly to her room.

"Come," she said sharply, "tell Mr. Royden to get the doctor—quick."

Elinor's breathing was suddenly sharp, sharp and labored. It panted and halted. Her eyes hung heavily shut, but at the sound of her mother's voice she opened them. Veronika never forgot the look—the look that beseeched her and blamed her.

"Darling," she said, kneeling there, lifting the tired head in her arms, "what do you want me to do for you? What shall mother do?"

But Elinor's look seemed to blame her because she didn't know.

"Don't do a thing to exhaust her. She must not talk," said Miss Hastings in the quick professional whisper. She was fighting—the fighting nurse who must not stop for compassion or suffering.

Between them Veronika always felt that they tortured Elinor—the doctor and the nurse working so desperately. Stewart helped. His face seemed to Veronika's blurred vision to hang in space—a face which sought hers as if to ask again and again how much she could bear and she felt her eyes answer "Not that—not that—I couldn't."

The infinite came into the room and into the house.

Of the wild stream of prayers and beseechings that Veronika poured out in that brief hour she never remembered the phrasings. She only knew that she had offered every sacrifice, every hope, tried every prayer which had been taught her as efficacious. She beseeched the Mother of God—the Mother of God must know. She'd had enough sorrow. She wouldn't put any one else through it. If you could get to Her.

They wouldn't make Elinor suffer any more. Let her sleep. Let her rest. This sudden sinking would be temporary. It was not going to be serious. She had been as frightened as this before when she had the baby convulsions. Miss Hastings had got her through then. She was only a baby—a frail baby. A little choking baby—why wouldn't they leave her alone?

God was real—there—doing as he pleased with them all. These little gestures the nurse and doctor were making were no good now. Only prayer would help—demanding prayers. No God would dare to do a thing so horribly unjust. She must prove by her prayers that it was unjust.

“You know how badly things have been going,” she explained desperately, “but it doesn't matter. Anything can happen and I'll never say a word again—anything except this. You mustn't do it. She likes life so—she loves life. She's planned what she's going to do when she gets up—Blessed Mother—Blessed Mother!”

And all the time the strange stark horror in her mind seemed to warn her what was coming. It was the horror which drove her from the room where they worked over Elinor, the horror which drove her back at that final moment when the doctor raised his head and opened his hands with a terrible gesture of inability. For one swift moment Veronika lifted her child in her arms. It was from her arms that life was removed. The dealing between her and her God was direct.

Hush came, the gray hush which nothing could warm. Veronika sat beside her child. In her hand was a brush.

They let her brush the tangled hair herself. She sat very still. Very still, for she was only the receptacle of her agony and if she moved it stirred too hideously. These moments with Elinor had to be weighed, each one. They would take her away—they always took people who died away—even children, even little fragile children whom you'd sell your soul to keep, though they were like this. They'd take her. But before they did, there would be minutes, hours like this to sit beside her. Gently the brush caressed the hair—the lovely hair.

She heard Stewart come into the room. He came every now and then, she knew, and tried to do things for her. As if she cared for things done to her. They talked from a distance of keeping up her strength. Her strength—her abominable strength that she couldn't give her child in torture.

"Darling"—that was Stewart speaking, "won't you come now?"

"She can't be left alone."

"I won't leave her."

She looked up dully at him.

"Let me have my hour, too," he asked, his eyes on the white little form. For the first time she saw his face clearly. It looked as if every hope had gone. So old, so haggard, so ill-treated.

She stood up and his arm moved to support her.

"Sweetheart, where do you want us to take her? We'll have to decide that. A day has passed. You know, in Westover, the Roydens have a place."

Westover—the Roydens—strange people—there was a Pearse place too where her grandmother and grandfather lay. The child would be welcome there. But Elinor didn't belong there—or to them.

She belonged to Veronika.

"Let me take her home," she said, drearily.

"Home?"

"There's only Valhalla," Veronika answered.

Stewart's eyes looked at his wife with compassion. She was sorry for him that he must grieve for her as well as Elinor. She was all right.

"Anything on God's earth that will give you help shall be done. If you want to take her there, we'll go."

CHAPTER IV

IN her kitchen Mrs. Pearse still rattled saucepans, less vehemently than in the past, perhaps, just as her whole manner was less vehement. She was failing now. The energy which she had used in such vast quantities when she was a middle-aged woman, the energy of vituperation and confusion had seemed to leave her somewhat limp. Her daughter-in-law, resplendent in a hat of vivid green straw, stood by the kitchen door, one eye on the perambulator which stood on the board walk.

"How do you like my hat?"

Mrs. Pearse eyed it inimically.

"Why did you get the green?"

"Because I chose," said Peggy.

"Poor Tom," sighed Mrs. Pearse.

"Poor Tom!" his wife repeated angrily. "Poor nothing—he's pretty well taken care of, I guess. He's getting on all right. Going to have six thousand next year."

"Kill himself working."

Young Mrs. Pearse set her lips and sucked her cheeks in exasperation, then evidently decided that the controversy was useless.

"How is Veronika?"

"Upstairs—she's all right."

"Still taking on?"

A look of something like disdain from the older woman met the curiosity of Peggy.

"She takes it hard."

"Her husband hasn't come on in a long while, has he?"

"I guess that's their business, Peggy."

"Oh, well, I suppose so. I just came over to cheer her up a little." She wheeled the baby carriage around so that the child was shielded from the sun and came into the kitchen.

The old brown walls were the same, shabby, but the stove and tables shone cleanly and the room was cool after the heat of the sun.

"Veronika's been busy, hasn't she?" commented Peggy, looking around.

"Look here, young lady, I do all the work around here."

"Sure you do."

"And you'd better look after your own kitchen. I wouldn't have that hired girl of yours in my house. Sloppy, thieving thing she is."

"She's not in your house—fortunately."

Veronika came out into the kitchen silently. She was wearing a dress of orchid crêpe de chine and was slim almost to the point of attenuation.

"Hello, Peggy!" and to her mother—"Where are those raspberries?"

"Too nice a day to stick in a kitchen. Come for a walk," offered Peggy.

Veronika shook her head.

"Busy. I have some things to do later. Where's your baby to-day?"

"Out in the cab."

Veronika nodded, but did not offer to go to look at the baby. She did not want to and to be forced into saying something. She had come to hate talking.

"How's your husband?" asked Peggy.

Veronika looked at her with slightly questioning eyebrows.

"Quite all right."

"Hasn't been out here in several weeks, has he?"

"No—what of it?"

"Nothing." Peggy was eager for gossip, but she was slightly intimidated by Veronika. Veronika wouldn't fight with her. She would and did snub her. There were so many symbols of wealth about Veronika now. It might be true, as Tom said to Peggy, that Stewart had lost every red cent he ever had and was on the rocks, but Veronika still looked rich and had a way of acting rich even when she was peeling potatoes. Or was it rich? Peggy was not discriminating in choice or words, but it struck her that rich might not be exactly the word. Conceited maybe—

Ronny stood before the icebox now, planning the supper gravely, abstractedly. Sometimes she did not seem to hear what was being said to her. Peggy made a few more passes at her mother-in-law and departed.

"I think I'll get along home then."

"Sorry you're not staying," said Veronika, but still with that abstraction which put the other girl at arm's length. She stood watching Peggy manipulate her baby carriage and flourish down the walk. Peggy was becoming quite a figure in Valhalla. Tom was superintendent of one of the mines and doing well, so well that Peggy had a sealskin coat and belonged to the Woman's Club.

"She's the one that gives herself a good time," said Mrs. Pearse. "She knows how to take care of herself. That'll be her last baby."

Veronika again did not seem to hear. She took a bowl of raspberries to a chair by the window and began to

look them over. But it was clear that her thoughts were in some secret chamber, hidden away, some secret chamber which no one could penetrate.

"When is your husband coming on, anyway?"

"Stewart? Oh, I don't know. Maybe next month. He's busy, he says."

"What's he doing?"

"Business."

"Much business! He's after a good time like all men. You're a fool to let him cavort around the country while you sit at home. Men always have the good time."

"I suppose," agreed Veronika, lifelessly, "but nobody has a very good time."

"A man will always impose on a woman if he can. Look at your father!"

"He certainly has a gift for imposition. Poor father."

Mrs. Pearse sniffed.

"Poor father—always poor father. What did he ever do for you? Where'd all of you be to-day if it weren't for me?"

"Limbo," answered her daughter, briefly. It was clear that she wouldn't quarrel. It wasn't that she felt any more kindly towards those around her, but quarrels disturbed her quiet misery. And misery was only bearable when it lay quiet in her like a stilled child.

"These are ready," she said after a minute, "and I'll make a short cake when I come back."

"Where are you going?"

"Driving."

"Why don't you take your mother along?"

"I will to-night. Not this afternoon."

"You ought to keep away from that cemetery."

Veronika's whole body stiffened with sudden passion.

"That's my own business," she said fiercely, and slammed the door.

Little Stewart was awake now. She dressed him and took him out with her in the car, one of the few things Stewart had salvaged from their New York possessions. There was a carload of furniture in storage downtown, but Veronika could not bear to look at it. She knew it would hurt and these days she tried to avoid hurt. The car Stewart had insisted on; and although at first it had seemed unbearable to drive, remembering how Elinor had looked as she sat within its plate glass windows and made little comments on the streets and toy shops, it had grown easier now. Little Stewart sat in Elinor's place. He was commencing to talk now. He was happy always, not gay like Elinor, but cheerful and contented, something of a companion—all there was in Valhalla since Stewart had gone back to New York.

They drove down the street which always looked like the street of a small town in spite of having the dimensions and improvements of a city, and several women turned to look at her, for all unknown to herself, Veronika of London and New York and grief and disaster had become a figure of romance. Along those streets herded with little Ford cars, with here and there an expensive touring car or glistening sedan, Veronika's little coupé of golden brown with its foreign body was instantly remarked, and Veronika herself with her expensive cosmopolitan hats and strange, weary, distant face made people look at her twice. All sorts of rumors floated about concerning Lily and Veronika, but Veronika did not know that. She only knew that here in Valhalla she had a sense of being at home, identified again

with her old spirit that was at home in conflict and unhappiness.

Past the open pit mines where the red clay roads curled, past the scrub woods where hideously colored fireweed was everywhere, Veronika drove. Stewart was on the lookout for cows, hailing every one he passed with a shout of delight. He knew where they would turn in, at the rather rude entrance to the cemetery, though the cemetery to him was only a place where his mother came and cut flowers.

Veronika stopped the car and sent Stewart into the field to pick buttercups. The cemetery sloped into the field, so new and rough it was. Little sodded green plots were here and there, gray and white slabs of granite and marble announced meaningless names. There was just one name in the whole place that meant anything to Veronika. It was engraved simply on a piece of white marble beside a small grave bordered with white daisies, "Elinor Royden—beloved daughter"—Stewart's name, Veronika's name and the pathetic dates of birth and death. Between the engraving separating the lines was a cross—a small comforting cross that Veronika had asked them to engrave as a symbol of the immortality in which she had to believe now, in which she could not help believing.

She cut the daisies that fresh ones might bloom, and sat, as she so often did, on the marble bench Stewart had placed beside his child's grave. Here, in the afternoon sun, with her boy picking flowers in the field close by and before her, below the brow of the hill on which the cemetery was placed, the panorama of the distant fields and the gaping cuts in the earth that were mines, she felt soothed. She came sometimes at night when white moon-

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light was groping among the graves—once when it was raining and the tombstones were all washed clean and the grass was incredibly green. It was always the same. Peace was here. It was the shore of infinity. There was no more to fear, no more to find out. In the end that was no end Veronika found range for her imaginings. Always before she had been trammelled or baffled, but here it was not so. Here, where all life was dwarfed and the things of life of only small importance, rages slipped away, fears dissolved. The agony of separation remained, but that she shut in her heart.

Here she could think of Stewart without the confusion of thought she always felt in her mother's house, where her mother accused him of unfeeling and neglect. Stewart's life was not her own; Veronika knew at last. On the mighty occasions of her life he had met her fairly, shared her love, her attempts at building up a home, her grief. She hated to think of him now in New York. Without a home, without money, men went to pieces so quickly. She saw him with the beaten look on his face going in and out of hotel doors, becoming more and more assiduous in his search for liquor. Odd, what stimulus and comfort he seemed to get from that. She meditated on it without rancor, only seeing his face as it must be, desperate, aging, uncomforted, still giving her the best he could. Michael had gone like that. Michael was somewhere now, in Albany when she had last heard of him, living in a flat—fattened, coarsened, soured. Men had a beastly time. It was strange that they all didn't hate women, women who made themselves so desirable for a little and then choked their lives and ambitions with disaster and pain. If Stewart had never met her, wanted her, perhaps he would still be a wealthy man,

still be as nonchalant as when she knew him first. But he didn't hate her even now, he was pained when he couldn't help her—that was all.

She was no longer alone in the cemetery. Others had come, drawn by that terrible desire for physical closeness to their dead. Not far away a young woman in cheap black clothes stood beside a grave that still was raw with ungrassed earth. For a moment she gazed at it, then knelt down with an almost wild abandon, her head in her hands, her shoulders swaying with grief. Veronika glanced at her and looked away. The newness of the stranger's grief hurt intolerably. That woman must go home and find things that were there before the person died, find how much more perishable people are than things, hate things that cannot live and so lose life. She must remember and remember things that happened the day before, remember the slow abandonment of hope, the moment when it left, never, never to return—Veronika's hands began to clench themselves again as they always did when her agony came back over her in sickening waves.

It was growing late in the afternoon. Little Stewart was tired and his step dragged as he came back to her. She lifted him to carry to the car, thinking that she must hurry if she was to get supper ready when her father came home.

On the way home she met Tom with a girl and stopped her car to attract his attention. Tom should not go about with girls like that, even admitting Peggy to be difficult.

"Can I take you home?" she called clearly.

He hesitated, then came, with a quick word of good-bye to the flashy girl at his side.

"Who's your friend, Tom?"

Tom grinned sulkily, getting inside the car.

"Nobody that you know."

"Cheap stuff!"

He shrugged, and Veronika turned to speak to him, then suddenly changed her mind. He seemed to have the look Stewart had lately, the baffled look underneath bravado, the half-suppressed unhappiness, the discouragement covered with insolence. Her homily failed her. She reached out her free hand and patted his arm.

"Poor old Tom."

"We're a sad lot, aren't we?"

"I don't know," said Veronika, "are we? With Lily having a wonderful career and you coming on. Isn't it six thousand a year that Peggy brags about?"

"You're a peach, Ronny. Always with your head up. You always were like that. Trying to smooth things over."

"I haven't managed to smooth them over for Stewart."

"Where is that bird?"

She answered as she had answered her mother.

"In New York."

"What's he doing?"

"I guess he's trying to make a living for us."

"He got caught pretty much between the wheels, didn't he?"

She nodded, catching her lips at the thought of the cruelty of it.

"Oh, he'll come out all right. There are times when you think the world is going to end, but it never does. All during the war when I finally broke loose from Peggy and got in a camp, just too late to be sent abroad, I could have—oh, hell."

Veronika shook her head. She knew how tragic Tom's attempt to get away and fight had been. She had always thought him rather weak not to break away from Peggy even before the baby came.

"You wanted to fight, didn't you?"

"Not much fun to be on the outside of a show like that. A thing like that—history! And me puttering around Valhalla."

"Why didn't you just go?"

"Oh, she had me scared—I didn't know much about this baby business. She got through all right. I could have gone months before I did. And even then I'd have seen some fighting if I'd been sent to any other camp. Rotten luck all around."

"So you try to console yourself with that cheap little thing I just pulled you away from?"

He grinned again, sheepishly. "You have to have some fun in this burg. That girl's all right. She's a good sport. Lord, she doesn't nag at you anyhow."

"You picked Peggy," she answered.

"And I'm sticking to her. I'll see it through. I wish, though, that you'd sort of keep an eye on the baby, Ronny. When she gets a little older I want her to have—oh, I just don't want her to make mistakes. You and Lily—could show her things that Peggy can't, no matter how much money I make. I want her to have a different view of life than Peggy has—different from the one I have. A few years ago you remember how big I used to talk? Well, I want the baby to get big things." He regarded his sister. "You're big, Ronny. You're an awfully good sport even when you are up against it."

"I don't want to be. I hate having people think I'm

that. I hate people who cash in on their sufferings by making themselves more holy. It doesn't bring my baby back—"

Embarrassed at her grief, he fell silent and she recovered herself. Tom began to talk to the child, who was climbing over him. His voice took on lower tones, kindlier ones. He must be a good father. He likes children, thought Veronika.

"Come home with me and let's telephone Peggy to come over," she said suddenly. "I think you'd give your mother a thrill. And I'm going to try sweetbreads and mushrooms. We never had those when we were children, did we?"

"We had baked beans in cans."

"How good they tasted! I must try some again and see if they still do. Tell me about the new job, Tom."

"Oh, the job's all right. Big money in it some day—low grade ores haven't begun to be developed yet. It may mean Duluth after a few years—nuts for Peggy. She's mad to get to a city."

"Are you?"

"What does that matter if she is?" He had his mind still on his wife. "This marriage problem's an awful business, isn't it?"

Veronika, who dealt rarely in generalities, spoke sharply.

"There isn't any such thing as a marriage problem. It's forced stuff—movie stuff. Peggy speaking of the marriage problem—getting it from movie posters and theatrical magazines or sex novels. There isn't any marriage problem. There's a problem of living. But if you can't live well in marriage you won't live well out of it."

Tom chuckled.

"Truly," she said earnestly, "you know I'm right. If you have a trained mind you can turn it to whatever comes along. If you're—oh, personally well-trained, marriage, riches, poverty are just accidents of existence and you can get along under most circumstances or with almost any one. All this rubbish about having your life warped by the fact that you are living with some one who doesn't exactly please you, makes me sick. Why not see it through?"

"Father did and look at the lovely time we had," he reminded her.

"Oh, well, that was his fault too. It could have been managed—at the start. He was probably thinking what a problem marriage was while she got her head and he never managed to get her into control again."

They stopped in front of the old Pearse house. It had become rather an attractive house with the passage of time, possible because there was so much stark newness in Valhalla. The great cluster of creeping woodbine that covered the porch was just beginning to have a red or yellow leaf here and there. The perennials by the gate had grown very tall and the cinnamon phlox in bloom now made the air heavy. Veronika parked her car and went up the walk with Tom, feeling a quiet peace. Here they were, she and Tom after all these years, going home to supper. War and death and calamity had passed over them. But side by side with the peace was the remembrance of obligation, of part of her life not ordered. That was the Stewart part.

"Tom's come for supper. Did they send those mushrooms?"

"I will not eat toadstools," said her mother, angrily.

"Telephone Peggy. We're having a party—a family party."

"Was I consulted?"

"You're consulted now."

Mrs. Pearse scolded, but mildly, habitually. Nobody cared. The twilight fell and the lamps in the living-room were lit. In the shabby kitchen the sweetbreads steamed and there was the smell of baking shortcake. Little Stewart had to be put to bed, and Veronika went upstairs and down endlessly. Tom came and sat on the kitchen table and in the living-room Dr. Pearse, delighted at the interlude of a family dinner, settled himself by the reading lamp. No one disturbed him.

Veronika lit two candles on the table and thought that after all Peggy wasn't so bad when she kept her mouth shut. She played the piano rather decently. But her mind did not stay on Peggy. She put her child in bed and served the dinner and saw them all content for the moment, and then her thoughts stole away to the thought of Elinor and the white daisies that would gleam over her little grave in the moonlight, and she mourned because Elinor could not have this warm, delicious, troublous thing—life.

CHAPTER V

I

THERE are so many people in New York with the earmarks of failure. A strange place, for when success has come it is only the success one sees, but in failure other failures start up from every corner to beckon and to condone and sympathize. Stewart had reached the point now when he had to avoid many people and many places—the people because he had quarreled with them or borrowed their money, the places because he might meet such people. He had managed to sublet the house and dispose of much of the furniture to the people who took the house over with an option to buy it, sending the rest on to Valhalla because there seemed nothing else to do with it. He had done that unaided. Veronika hadn't cared. But he felt that some day she would care and he had sent to her for storage the blue brocaded furniture and the odd twisted brass andirons with heads of dwarfs and the breakfast room furniture of apple green with its lovely painted designs—the things from her room—her own mauve silk chaise longue—Elinor's furniture—there were times during the dismantling of the furnishings that Stewart realized how much joy he and Veronika must have had, for so many things had happy associations, even after a year, so many things she had prized, and he had not seemed to remember until now how much the acquisition of all these things had meant to her. He could recall her in a dinner dress coming down the stairs—in a soft blue negligee—at their

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first evening party in New York when millions had been very close to him and he had insisted on giving her a bracelet of platinum and diamonds. She had laughed so happily at the extravagance.

The house was no longer even his to rent. The Hollises lived there now and had put red and white striped matting up and down the steps. Veronika's cream silk draperies still were at the windows, but some one had put an ugly begonia in full blatant bloom between them. One could see it from the street. Stewart never passed the house now. He lived first at his club, but that was expensive, besides it made him too much linked to one crowd. He decided on a hotel—a less expensive hotel a little later, as his funds ran short. The sale of the furniture and one of the cars had given him some money—and people had offered to lend him some after Elinor's death, and he had raised some on his insurance. There had been plenty to relieve Veronika of the hideous embarrassment of not having enough at such a time and to take them to Valhalla with one car. There he had left her with a few hundred dollars and come back to New York, hopeful in spite of the recent disasters that bad luck had struck bottom for him.

People were decent. But there was no opportunity. There were plenty of men who wanted a game of bridge or who knew how to get a drink of whiskey, but they never offered to let Stewart sit in at the business game he wanted. Dunn had gone to Europe shortly before Elinor's death—Cook's touring, damn him, Stewart thought savagely. He couldn't do anything at all with the company so under Dunn's thumb, and Dunn in England trying to handle new contracts on his own account. The mere thought could make Stewart see red.

At first Stewart missed Veronika. He was used to talking to Veronika now. Not to have her when the black periods of sadness came, when he thought of his lost child and his lost fortunes, was dreadful. But Stewart knew the rules. Men didn't have hysterics. They got a drink and remained men and cursed and swore and decided that it was a hell of a world and the best you could do was to get by somehow. The worst times came when he imagined himself as one of the men with green overcoats and no money who wandered around the financial district. There wasn't money enough to project anything big. He had his own schemes constantly, but they all needed capital.

"Can I see you this morning, Davis? This is Stewart Royden."

That was the way so many telephone conversations started.

Davis—or whoever it was—would postpone the meeting or dodge the proposition Stewart brought or adapt it to his own needs and leave Stewart out. No one pitied Stewart. He was young and strong and had flown too high, they all said. He'd had the big head and tried to make a fortune over night. Lost it, all he had. Not a safe man, on the whole. Attractive, brilliant fellow, no doubt, but it didn't go any further. Broken with Dunn. So the little trickles of half careless gossip ran. Stewart knew what they said. He'd heard talk about other men in his fix. That was why he had liked Paul Henderson. Henderson had never moralized at any one's expense. He had been unscrupulous up to a point—all business was that—but he had never tried to mix moral judgments with his deals. Because he had been powerful, he could do that. Stewart had liked his easy hedonism, his keen

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mind which never fooled itself for a minute as to its motives. But Stewart had not been successful, and so he had fallen prey now to this smooth reproving talk of normalcy, of policies of retrenchment. All he had left was an attitude toward life and it seemed as if the whole business world mocked that because he could not back the attitude with money.

He felt the ridiculousness of his idle days keenly. Across a gap there must be occupation for him. But it is not easy for a young man who has been rising in the Steel Industry and who has made some name for himself to suddenly become a manufacturer of tooth paste, a retail merchant, an automobile salesman. The gap was large and by the time he clambered across it he knew that his morale would be gone. Idle days, brooding discussion, liquor—and upon him always he seemed to feel the mark of the business world which meant—slaughter.

There was no Veronika. She had disappeared into a world somewhere where she was trying to work things out with a God whom he did not know, or want to know, trying to reconcile death with life. For days she seemed forgotten or remained as a sore memory of failure. He'd taken her from Valhalla and sent her back again, wretched, broken. There were days when she seemed only a fact, and it was only a fact that he had married and brought two children into the world, one of whom had died of influenza. Then suddenly she would come alive in his memory, and he would ache for her, for talk with her and touch of her. On those days his conviction that she despised him for his failure was hard. For he knew, as was true indeed, that Veronika had married him before her love amounted to anything and that it had grown with care and kindness and pos-

sessions and protection. He had always known that about her. Then naturally, when he failed, he had seen doubt come into her eyes more and more often. He did not blame her for that. Love was a sweet and delightful experience, but like everything else it was dependent on circumstance.

He thought in those days that he must decide what to do about Veronika. She ought to be free from him. She would probably have nervous scruples about separating, but he could force it through and it would be best for her, and they could start fresh. There were other men in the world—no doubt their combination had been wrong from the start.

By midsummer he was living in a room at the top of a cheap hotel and eating where he pleased, rarely with friends. He had dropped most of his clubs. At night he walked and thought of women without interest and of Dunn with hate. His money was very low and the last had been borrowed from his mother. There was need for everything—for clothes for himself, for cash for Veronika.

He went into an obscure, quiet-looking grill for supper one night. For two days he had had nothing to drink and he was feeling worn and sober. As he looked in the glass by the rack where he hung his hat he noticed how the gray showed in his hair. Automatically he tried to look cocky and successful. He must keep up.

All the tables were full, but at one of them a man sat alone and Stewart pulled out the chair on the other side, and drew the card toward him. Mixed grill—filling—ninety cents—God, how rotten it was to count the cost of your supper!

Hate and discouragement were in his eyes as he looked

up and vaguely recognized the man across from him. Where had he seen him before? He thought of Veronika automatically.

"Royden, isn't it?" said the other man. "Remember me? I'm Saul Griffin."

"Yes—of course."

Stewart eyed him inimically. It was added humiliation for Veronika to have her quondam lover find him here—with that frayed cuff showing.

"Hear you won a big prize."

"Some time ago, that was. I'm living on the glory of it yet," answered Saul easily. "How's Mrs. Royden?"

"In Valhalla."

"Visiting her father?"

"We lost our little girl, you know."

"I didn't know—how awful—"

"Awful," nodded Stewart.

"Is Veronika very unhappy?"

Stewart looked at the other man. He felt suddenly that he wanted to confess his failure for Veronika—humiliate himself. Here was a man who would not gloat over it—and how he knew that he didn't know.

"She's very unhappy," he said, indicating his order to the waitress, "very. She's made a marvelous fight with me and we lost everything—then Elinor."

Saul seemed to be visualizing the whole thing. His rather soft, sensitive face was strained.

"Lately—all this?"

Stewart told him. He told him about many things. Their orders came—they ate and smoked and the people left the little restaurant and still they talked on about business and failures and the strangeness of success and all the time what they spoke of really was Veronika, who

had been the motive and the butt of so much struggle. But they mentioned her very little because they both were gentlemen and had both wanted to marry her.

"Of course," said Stewart, at length, half repenting these confidences, "this is all temporary. Of course, I shall come back."

Saul looked at him doubtfully—then hardly.

"You must—for her sake."

"You mean that was what she married me for?" Stewart hadn't meant to say that, but he did.

"I mean I hate to think of her out there in Valhalla again. She wanted things so desperately. I used to be bitter about her wanting things. But gradually I came to understand as I've seen other women wanting—wanting—that her demands were different. It was her respect for life—her self-respect that needed to have things better and finer. I saw her a few months ago, you know, one day at a party."

"Did you?"

"I told her she looked smug. After I got away her face stayed with me. I was a fool to think it was smug. Anything but that. It was her clothes which put me off."

"Well—better go before they put us out?"

They went out in the street.

"I live near here," said Saul, "our apartment's in the next block. Can't you come home with me? My wife will be home now. Like to have you meet her."

Stewart shook his head.

"Thanks," he said, "I must get back to my hotel."

They shook hands and parted, and Stewart went briskly down the street as if quickly on his way to wring happiness out of the world for Veronika. But halfway back to the cheap hotel he remembered that happiness

couldn't be wrung—he had tried it before. Nothing could be forced. Your luck didn't change like that. He felt intolerably let down and in need of a drink.

He hated to go back to the hotel, but he did so at last. Its shabby corridor depressed him. Under his door he found a telephone message marked as having come at four that afternoon. "Call Mr. Dunn in A.M."

"Dunn," said Stewart, aloud. "Dunn—what does he want? Well—maybe he wants to buy me off the West-over directorate. That would be something for Veronika." And falling across the bed wearily, for he had found his drink, he went to sleep.

2

When he awoke the sun was streaming in and he was still extremely tired. Energy didn't flow back easily those days. At first he lay stupidly, wondering why he should get up. Then he heard a chambermaid rattling his doorknob and shook himself awake. Dunn's message lay on his bureau. He was minded this morning to disregard it or to tell him to go to hell. However, he bathed in the sloppy shower down the hall and dressed himself laboriously that he might not look seedy when he told Dunn to go to hell. He chose a shirt which was clean and not too shabby, and he could get his shoes shined at the corner.

Mr. Dunn was sitting behind his desk when Stewart came in. He looked as if he had been busy for hours and was squeezing in time for this appointment made over the telephone with Stewart. Stewart hated him for his activity from the depths of his own inactivity.

"How are you, Royden?"

"Very well, Mr. Dunn."

"Haven't seen much of you lately."

"I've been busy."

Dunn looked him over. He saw the gray lines in Stewart's hair, and he was not inexperienced. He knew how hard they'd forced Stewart.

"I have a proposition that may interest you. We are interested—our board of directors—in going on, now that things are resuming a normal activity, with the acquisition and development of ore properties on the Valhalla range. You made the first investigation. We would like you to go out there and take charge of the development."

"I've had no experience in mining, Mr. Dunn," said Stewart shortly. "My experience in Westover was in the manufacture of steel. Until recently I was engaged in the export end—as you know."

"But you made the first investigation in Valhalla—"

"At that time I was interested in Valhalla for personal reasons."

"Wife's people live there, I believe."

"They do."

Dunn fingered his chin. Royden was vicious. Still, after all, they did want him badly. There had been a good deal of talk yesterday on the board about having let too good a man go when Royden was let out. Besides if he stayed around he might get in with some other company. And there were the other reasons—

"I don't think you quite get me—"

Stewart's head was poised, eager. He knew that tone of Dunn's. So they wanted him after all, did they? He'd always told Veronika that they'd have to come to

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him. He looked stronger, more confident. Dunn saw the power visibly rise in him.

"Suppose you make that somewhat plainer, Mr. Dunn. What is there in it?"

"There's more in it than appears. There's as much of a chance as you can make it. Mind you, I don't say these properties will necessarily be developed—but they promised well."

"And how much power have I?"

"Well—within reason—at the recommendation of the board, a great deal."

"I would have to be a member of the board, Mr. Dunn," Stewart put it down flatly. "I'll develop your properties if you like, but I must have a chance to put things before the board myself and a chance to acquire interests myself—"

"I understand you're hardly in a position at present to acquire holdings."

"I'm not. I'll have to be carried. But if I can be valuable out there it's worth it to you."

Dunn knew it was. He had a dozen reasons back of every action. Among others now he wanted Stewart in before Carver could get his own son lined up for this work. Carver's son was less to Dunn's liking than Stewart. It threw the balance of power to Carver. If he could simply say that they owed this to Royden.

He smiled his clever, successful smile.

"We can make it worth your while, Royden. These matters can be adjusted to satisfy you, I am sure."

"Thank you, Mr. Dunn."

"Make your plans then to leave immediately, will you? I understand you have given up your New York house. Where is your family now?"

"My wife's in Valhalla with her people."

"I met your wife's sister in London. Charming person. I met her at Lady Graves' country house. She spoke of you."

"She is having great success."

"So I understand. Is it authentic, by the way, that she's to marry young Cappan, Lady Graves' nephew?"

"Cappan?" Stewart saw light—Cappan steel was a big English corporation, an enormously wealthy house.

"I believe—though it's quite in the family yet—that it is quite authentic," he answered.

"Fine," said Dunn. That was another good reason for having Royden back. Royden knew too much about the way their corporation was run to be let loose for Cappan to pick up. Royden was too valuable.

Stewart left the office. If he'd known of that Cappan business he might have made a better bargain. Still—this was good enough. Valhalla—his own master—and on the directorate. His clothes seemed to fit him better—the inimical, taunting looks seemed to drop like masks from the faces around him. People were friendly.

CHAPTER VI

I

THE Valhalla papers were full of the news. They were always proud of Lily, whom they referred to usually as "Valhalla's own Lily Pearse." But this news, clipped from society magazines and flashed through the Associated Press, quite enthralled them. "Beautiful actress's romance. American girl marries into one of England's wealthiest families, connected by marriage with—" and so on. The blatant wording of it, accompanied by endless photographs of Lily, was everywhere. It seemed as if all Lily's personal success, her lovely voice and charming acting, was nothing in the eyes of the press and the world in comparison with her marriage to this rich young man, hero of the war, nephew of Lady Graves, who had been one of the Scarborough girls of South Carolina.

Even Mrs. Pearse, though unwilling to disallow her premise that all marriage was slavery, showed that she was faintly impressed. She said that she hoped Lily wouldn't lose her health over there in that damp country and why didn't she write to her mother about it? But she was gratified. To her, as to Valhalla, titles had a storybook sound and Lily was close to them.

People halted Veronika on the street to ask about it, to recall that they had always prophesied great things for Lily. Ellie Lewis stopped her resplendent Pierce Arrow to run up to the Pearse door and gossip with Veronika.

"Is he young and good looking—Lily's man?"

"Yes—he's young."

"Is it true that he's had half his face shot away?"

"What rubbish, Ellie. Who's been telling you that?"

"Oh, you know how people talk. I tell them that it's very common over there for rich young men—lords—to marry girls off the stage."

"Truly?" Veronika's tone was one which she seldom used these days, but it disposed of Lily's questionnaire. It implied familiarity with things quite beyond Ellie's ken.

But when her visitor had gone Veronika re-read her last letter from Lily—the only one of months. It brought her sister so perfectly to mind. She could see her clearly in that slim black dress which she had put in her cabin trunk, with her yellow hair shingled and brushed back until it fitted the shape of her face perfectly—always a picture, always charming with that easy, accustomed manner. How they would stare at her at English dinner tables and how confidently she would meet every one. Never any awkwardness, always perfectly dressed.

She would be a guest in great houses—a favored guest too. There was no doubt of that. No man would ever be ashamed of Lily. And she wrote that they were to live part of the time in the country in an old house—a great place that her young husband was buying from some friend of his, an impoverished nobleman. Riches—position—but she could have had all that from Paul Henderson. The stake she had been playing for was larger and she had won. The letter was half crushed in Veronika's hand, but the words of it were in her mind—

"I'm really wild about Jerry. If I hadn't been, nothing

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would have pulled me off the stage. Lyon Duxbury, who's been hanging around, never could make me stop acting. And maybe I'll go back to it again. I don't know. But first there'll be Jerry and my house—babies, I suppose. English people always have rafts of them, but they have so many nurses it doesn't cramp their style. Jerry really is a darling. They don't grow like that in New York. He's so gloriously nonchalant about everything that we get along perfectly. His connections don't seem to think I'm so bad. They are so glad Jerry didn't get killed in the war or marry a French nurse that they put up with anything, I suppose. However, they'll make it pleasant." And then, at the end, "Jerry's father is interested in steel manufacture or something like that. If there's any way I can help Stewart let me know. And don't stick around Valhalla, Ronny. It's horrible for you. Of course, just at first you went there on impulse, but now I should think you'd break away. I'm glad I can make my contract an excuse for getting married over here. I never did have your feeling about the old home-stead, you know—"

Veronika looked around her. Through the lace curtains the glimmer of afternoon sun came on the worn sofa, the ill-matched chairs of plush and leather, the rug that mocked Oriental colorings, the cherry table and the one of mission oak. She had redeemed the stupid room with a vase here, a pile of books, a lamp or two. But as she looked at it now it seemed hopelessly shabby—worse, a worthless room. Much of her childhood, much of her youth had gone in the ordering of this pile of rubbish. Her feeling for the place! Lily was indifferent, but Veronika felt at that moment that her own was livid hate.

Clatter came her mother's heels down the stairs.

"Ellie Lewis is gone?"

"You see that she is."

"What did she want?"

"She wanted news about Lily—whether Englishmen married girls off the stage and so on."

"Nosey thing."

"Well—she didn't find out much from me."

"I hope you were nice to her."

"Why should I be nice to her?"

Mrs. Pearse surveyed her daughter.

"What's the matter with you?"

"What do you mean?"

Her mother relapsed into a kind of muttering.

"I wish I had that husband of yours here—loafer."

"Leave him alone, will you?"

"I will just as much as I please. Leaving you here like this—while he's running around with other women. If you had any spirit you'd give him a piece of your mind that he wouldn't forget in a hurry."

"Will you mind your own business? I've enough to think of—"

"Oh, well, I wouldn't go around carrying the world on my shoulders—"

Veronika's tone mounted to hysterics.

"The world on my shoulders! The world on my shoulders! Who else is there to carry it? Of course I have it. Doesn't every one of you dodge every responsibility but me. Haven't I been clearing up chaos for years for all of you? Did Lily ever do anything except take care of herself?"

"And I admire her for it," said Mrs. Pearse stoutly.

"You do! You would. But if something has to be

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done, it's me that does it. All day I've been at it, cooking for you, listening to that wife of Tom's talk and talk about the baby she doesn't want, and how Tom runs around with other girls—I've had to cheer her up—I've had to cook and wash out napkins—"

"Well, why don't you get a home of your own? This is my house. Why don't you live with your husband then? What's the truth of it? Has he left you?"

Fear closed in around Veronika, pricking her from every direction. She could feel something wrong with her eyesight. Things wavered. Maybe he had deserted her—left her and her baby here to the mercy of whatever chance might come. The contrast of Lily's happiness made her own situation preposterous. She had tried so hard to play things right, to support her system of God and ethics, and life slapped her in the face at every turn. While all the time her mother called out to her that she was a fool, an utter fool.

"What if he has left me?" she asked darkly. "What if he has?"

"No man could ever leave me like that."

Veronika shrieked with laughter.

"You and your man," she cried, "you who warped my life from the beginning. You taught me everything except the things I should have known—how to live beautifully. What chance have I had—what chance have I had?"

"Don't yell so."

"I'll yell so I'll bring the house down about my ears, if I want to. I've a right to yell, God knows."

"If you'd keep away from that church and cemetery maybe you wouldn't lose your mind."

Veronika's hands clenched and her eyes glared. They

stood facing each other and then in horrible realization Veronika saw likeness between them. Crying, laughing, half screaming, she fled past her mother, up to her room, where the springs on her bed creaked beneath her as they had done so often before as she lay sobbing, crying again and again in that black hour the name of the one person who seemed to have understood her and cared for her, her dead child.

Yet at five o'clock, when the whistles blew through the town announcing that work stopped for hundreds of workmen, Veronika automatically remembered that baked ham takes an hour to cook. She sullenly resisted the thought, but still Stewart had to have his cream of wheat now, her father would be home. Her father came home so weary—why give him another scene? She might mark her child as she had been marked. She would get supper. Then to-morrow she would find a place somewhere for herself and little Stewart to live by themselves. Out of all this wreckage she would save her son at least.

Carefully she dressed herself—a fine dress of orange-silk crêpe that would catch the baby's eye and delight him, a dress that proclaimed her a lady of taste. Her mother sat rocking on the porch as she went down. Veronika straightened the chairs which she had pushed aside in the living-room in her storm of anger. For a moment she stood by the window wondering if little Stewart had heard anything. Then she called him.

Her feet felt leaden as she went about her work, her heart as if it had been rubbed sore with all the injustice. In her mind she could see Stewart going up and down the streets of New York, abandoning her and his child. Lily would help him, she said. Lily help her husband.

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Why was it always Lily who seemed able to do everything?

Dr. Pearse's steps dragged up the walk. He cleared his throat and hung up his coat and brushed his hair before the mirror in the hall. Veronika knew his every movement. She heard him coming to the kitchen and tried to make her face brighter. At least he'd had enough.

"I brought you a box of candy, Ronny," said Dr. Pearse. "I was just passing the store."

She took it from him, gently, the red-cheeked girl under the glazed paper wrapping smiling up at her.

"How nice."

"It's nothing. You don't have such a good time as you should, Ronny—with all you do."

"Oh, I'm all right." She felt the kindness like a weight. Did he perhaps know that Stewart had deserted her?

Baked ham. Dr. Pearse liked it and his wife too ate eagerly. But Veronika could not touch her plate. She listened to the quiet which shut her in, the sounds of the two old people eating, heard the whistle of the train from Duluth. The train—would she ever take it again?

"Who's that on the walk?" asked Mrs. Pearse.

Veronika got up and went to the kitchen.

"I don't want to see anybody more about Lily tonight. You tell them she is to be married in Westminster Abbey if you like."

Dr. Pearse had to go to the door. Veronika sat with her head in her hands on the table. She heard voices through the house. She wouldn't see people unless she liked. Then she stood up suddenly palpitant—

"Stewart," she cried, "Stewart, did you really come?"

He stood there in the doorway, all the old savor of safety and protection about him and all the feeling she had been suppressing came back in a flood of affection. Lily and her triumphs were swept aside. She had her husband.

She could see him—hear his talk of reassuring things—know that he would try to fend off misfortune—feel his arm about her comfortingly. But it all seemed so far off—so remote.

“I’m afraid that she’s worn out,” said Dr. Pearse.

Veronika shook her head. She did not dare speak for fear she would cry, and she didn’t want Stewart to have a scene the first hour he was there.

Stewart spoke in his old confident way.

“She must rest,” he said, “before we settle down in Valhalla for a while and find a house. I think I’ll ship her to England to see Lily married.” His eyes sought his wife’s, full of pity, eager with satisfaction at being able to promise help.

“And how about me?” asked Mrs. Pearse of her husband. “Why don’t you send me to see my daughter married?”

2

There seemed to be the same hush about the Pearse house to-night as there had been the night before her marriage. Veronika guessed how badly she must look to have the house quieted on her account and these plans laid for her relief. They sent her early to bed and Dr. Pearse clumsily brought up a glass of hot milk. Then she was alone, but comfortingly alone, for Stewart had only gone to look after some telegrams. She undressed

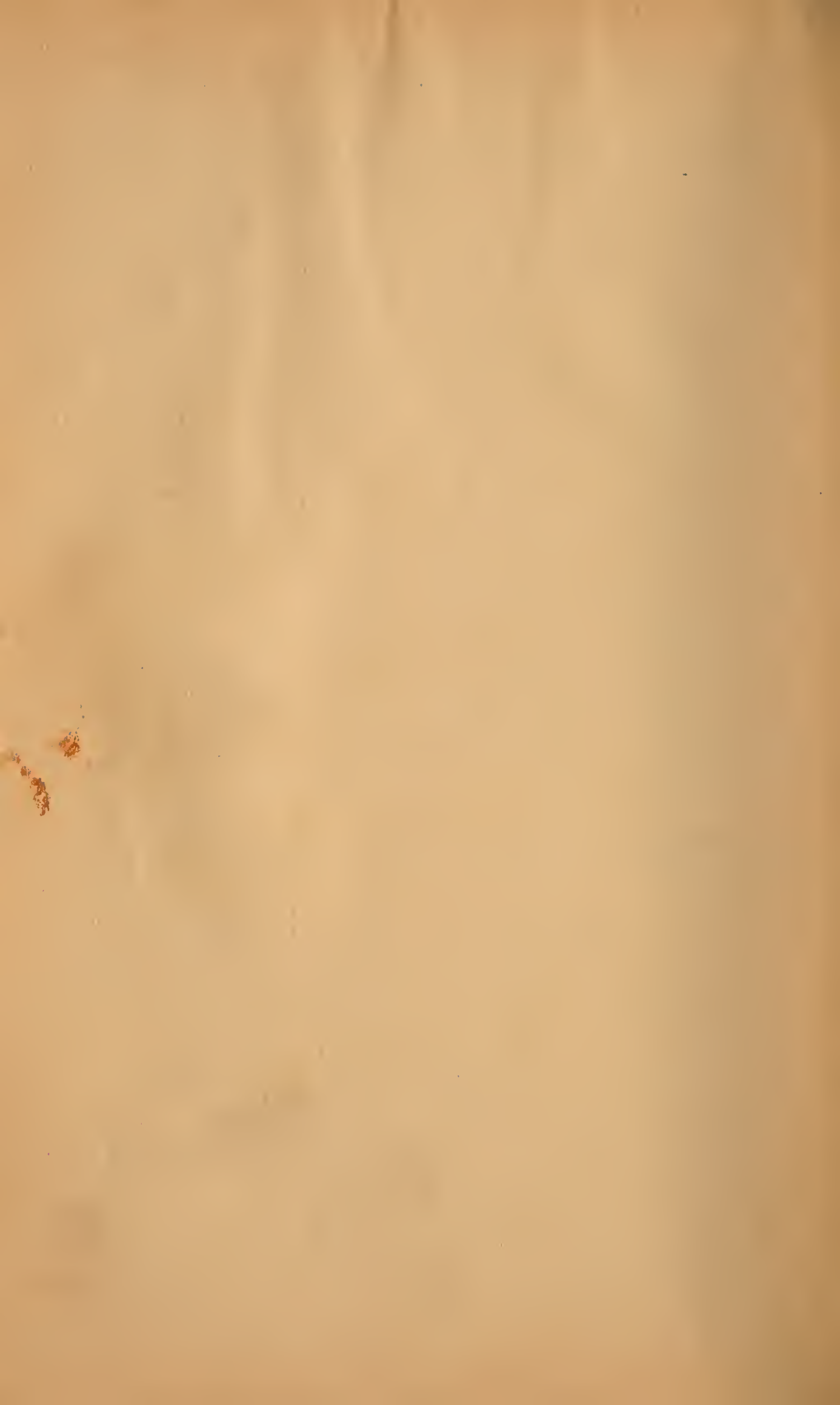
slowly. The baby was quiet in his crib on the other side of the room, but she could hear his gentle breathing.

She knelt down beside the bed. Every night it was her habit to arrange her responsibilities in prayers—there was one for Lily, one for her father—for Stewart's happiness—the moment she gave to prayer, not for Elinor, but to her. She set her family in order as best she could. But then, as she threw open her window and looked out on the clump of pines in the back yard, above which, in somber dignity and space, Deity had so often been secretly manifest and magnificent, she felt again the grave mystery and terror and wonder of the day, of all days, and hugged them close to her. This moment was only respite. Once she might have thought it marked a turning. But she knew better now. To-morrow she would be again at the mercy of chance, circumstance, emotion. She would never cheat life and she could not control it. Her only weapon was bravery, her only support one hand touching something in the soft darkness of eternity.

With a gesture of acceptance that was gallant in its mingled weariness and eagerness, she spread out her hands—

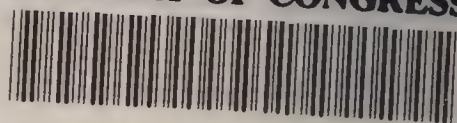
“It won't be my way,” she said aloud.

THE END



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